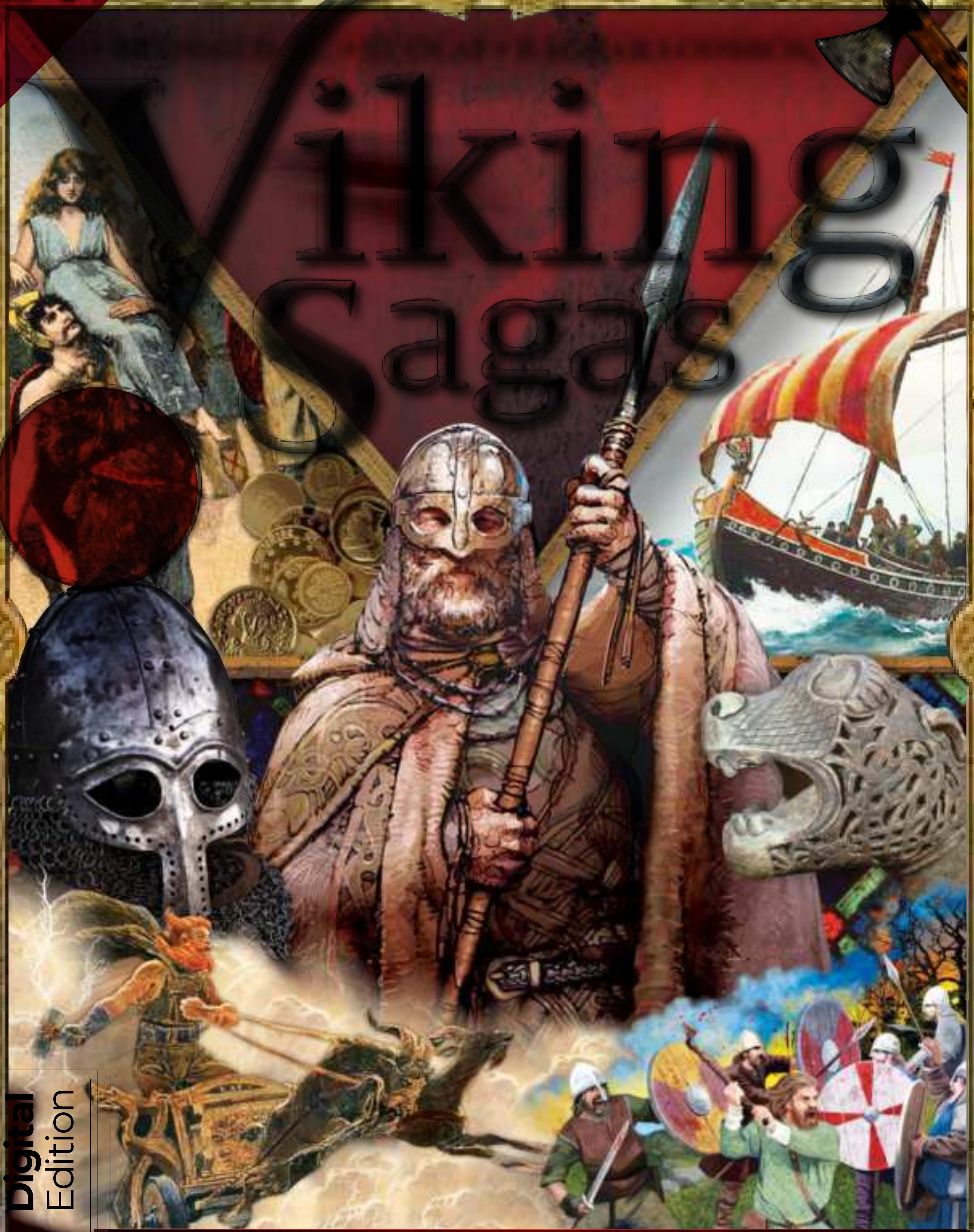
Viking Sagas



Digital Edition

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WELCOME TO

Viking Sagas

Over a thousand years ago, a king in the north called for a tale. From the shadows of the mead hall stepped forth a skald, one of the renowned poets of the Viking Age, responsible for memorising and interpreting the history and law of the land – and for entertaining its populace. He needed no book – those came later. Instead he carried it all in his head, as his forefathers had done before him for centuries. An expectant hush fell over the court as the famed storyteller took a breath and slowly, melodiously intoned the first, evocatively worded phrases of one of the great Viking sagas, or epic tales.

More than a millenium later, those sagas still have the power to enchant and enthrall. The stories of the gods, heroes (and heroines) and the ancient royal houses of the Norse lands are replete with myth, mystery, adventure and excitement. Sorceresses narrate arcane prophecies, men and women set forth on quests for magical swords and rings, and are elevated to greatness or consumed by curses that echo down generations of their family; would-be rulers skirmish and clash over old realms and new lands. Destiny rolls its loaded dice for gods and kings alike. The skald's audience often knew what was going to happen as the saga unfolded; it was the telling itself that they took pleasure in.

Now you too can enjoy the rich, fascinating world of the Viking sagas. This book brings to life some of the best-loved tales of the medieval north, from the origin stories of its gods and heroes to the deeds of its noble kings and the adventures of its bold explorers. They're not confined to the chilly shores of Scandinavia either – these stories travel south, east, and west to Europe, Byzantium, Russia, Persia, Africa, India, Asia, even North America. Step into the rich world of the sagas, and begin your very own Viking adventure.

FUTURE

Viking Sagas

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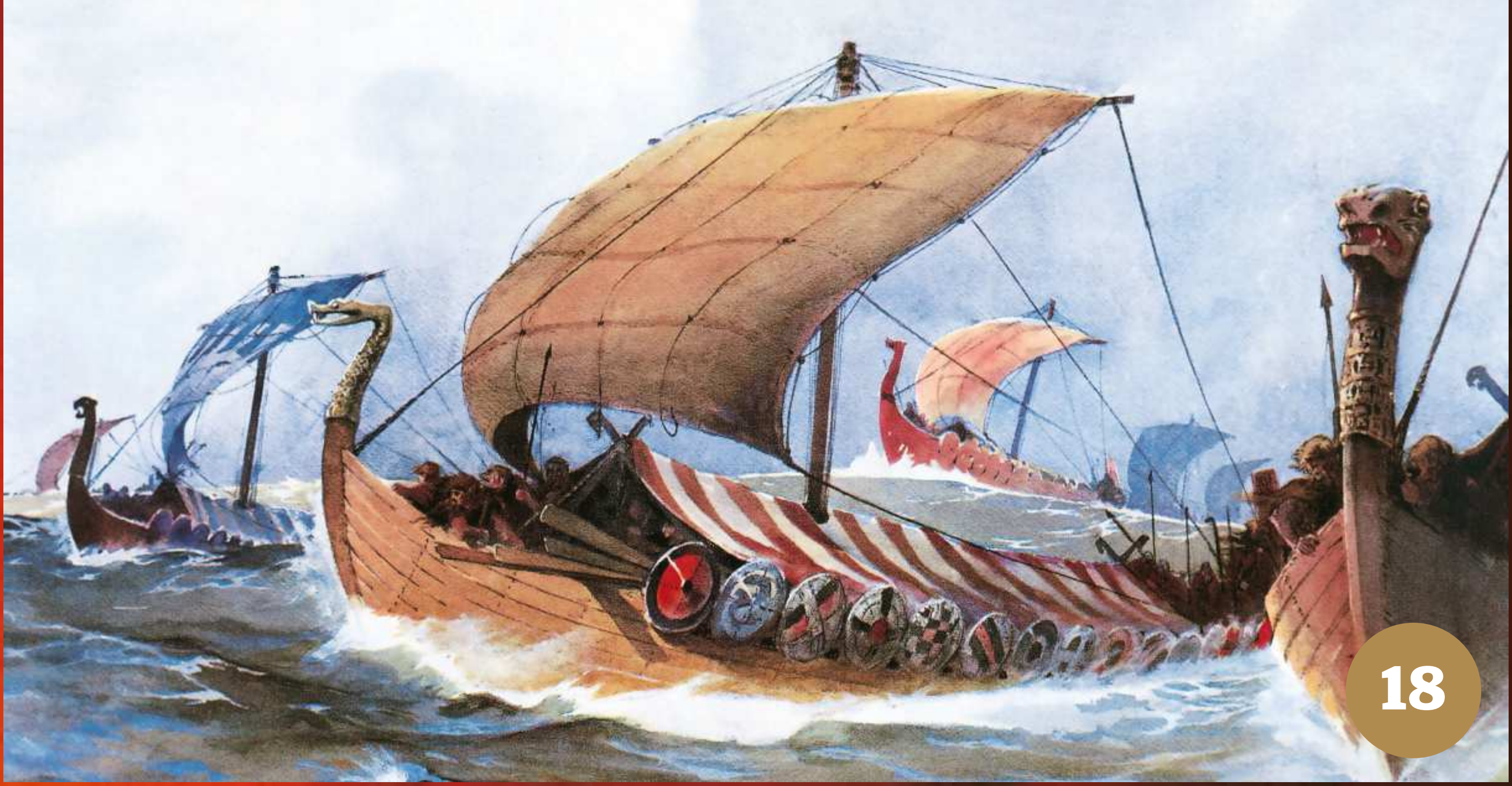
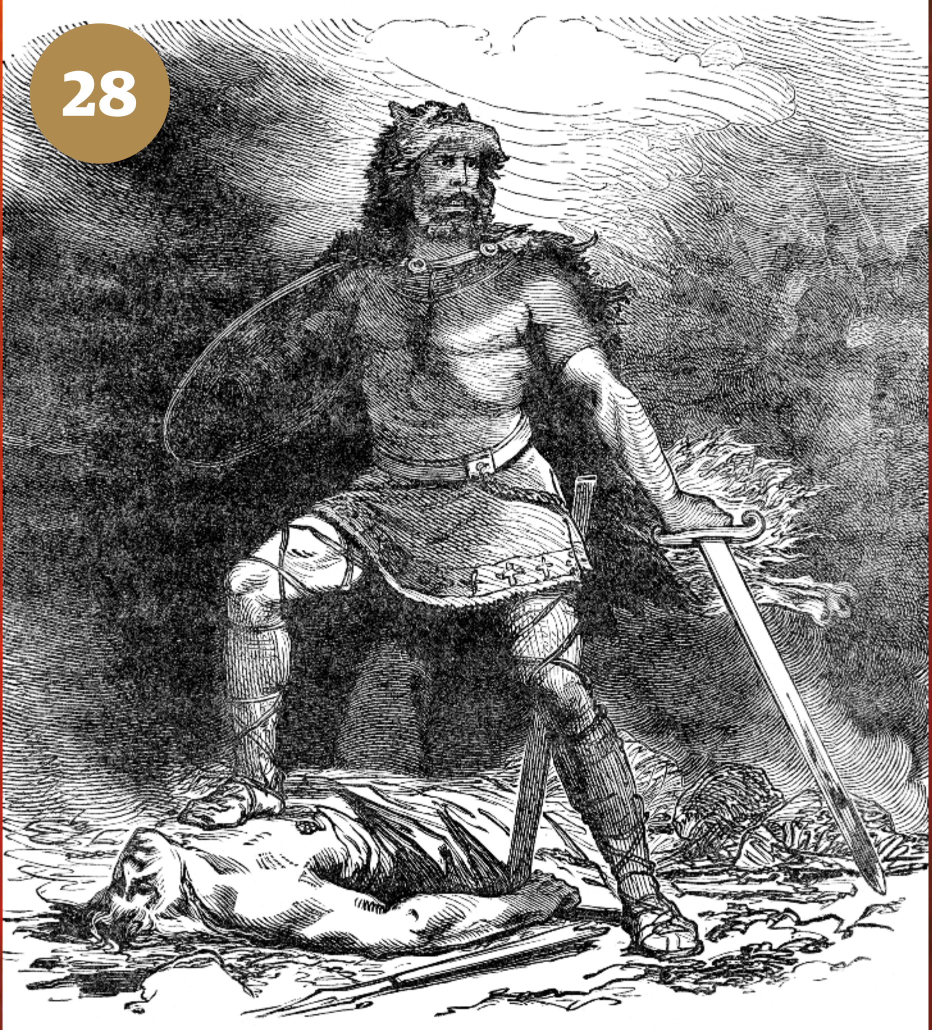
> "For centuries the Viking sagas were spread word of mouth via the skalds of the day"





TYR, THE SWORD-GOD.

DISCOVER THE VIKINGS

Portrayed as bloodthirsty pirates, pillaging innocent villagers, Vikings also ruled the waves with a lucrative trade network

Written by Frances White

The great white sail cracked as the vicious Atlantic wind lashed against it, but still the ship sailed on. Long and sleek, the warship, crafted from mighty oak, crashed through the waves, sending a sharp spray of water across the deck. The men inside rowed as one, their mighty muscles straining as they plunged the oars deep into the water and drove the ship forward through the turbulent waves. Their strength alone brought the ship to land and they poured out onto the beach. Dressed in thick woollen tunics, the warriors were armed with an array of weapons, from long sharpened spears to hefty battle-axes. With a booming voice one man yelled to the others, thrusting his sword into the air, and the rest bellowed in response. Then onward he ran, as the united force thundered uphill against the billowing wind. Their destination?

A coastal monastery bursting full of gold, gems and a hefty amount of food supplies ripe for the taking, and only a collection of quiet, unassuming monks to protect it.

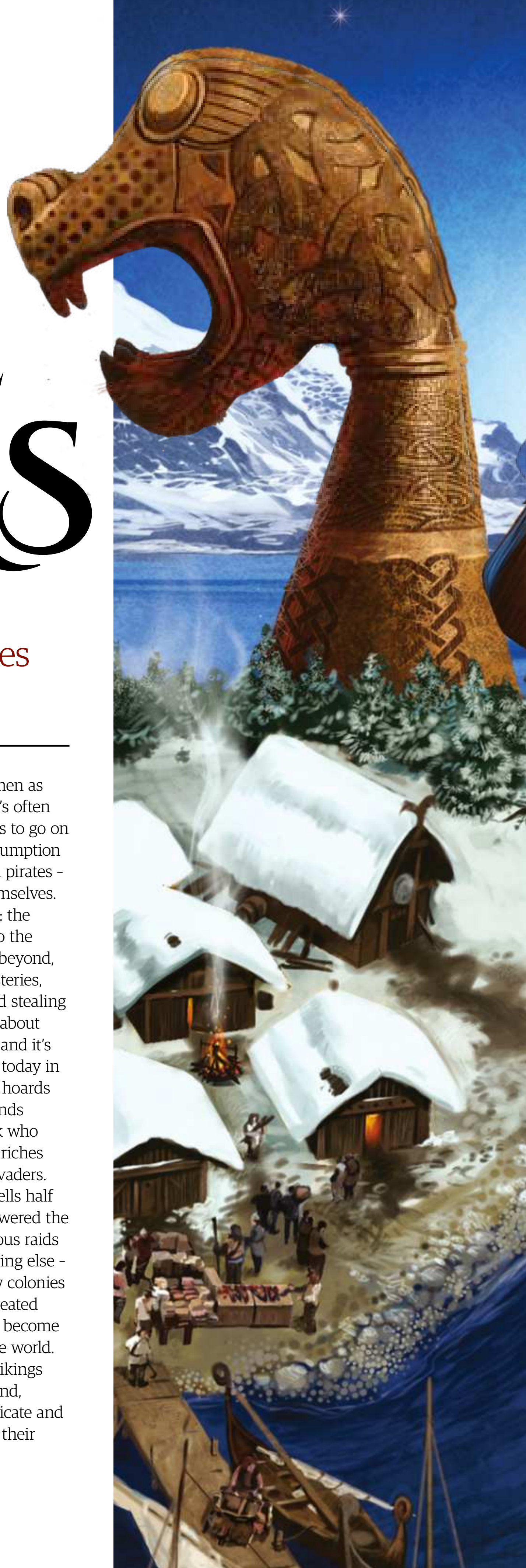
This image of monstrous invaders laying siege to innocent monasteries and pillaging them of their precious items is the first one that leaps to mind when many are confronted with the word 'Viking'. The portrayal of the Norse tribesmen as rapists and pillagers is so prevailing that it's often forgotten that the word Viking itself means to go on an expedition. It is easy to fall into the assumption that these people were nothing more than pirates - taking from those too weak to defend themselves.

And it is undeniable that this happened: the Viking invaders sailed from Scandinavia to the coasts of the British Isles and far beyond, invading villages and monasteries, killing the inhabitants and stealing their riches. It's spoken about in first-hand accounts and it's still being evidenced today in the reams of hidden hoards discovered on the lands of anxious townsfolk who hurried to hide their riches from the merciless invaders.

However, this only tells half the story. Two things powered the Viking civilisation: the vicious raids they're famous for, and something else - trade. Not only did Vikings set up new colonies in the lands they invaded, but they also created powerful trade routes that helped them to become one of the most prosperous societies in the world.

For the majority of the year, the same Vikings who had pillaged the towns worked the land, tirelessly toiling in the field, or crafted intricate and valuable ornaments and jewellery to fund their blossoming civilisation.

Vikings had excellent hygiene, bathing at least once a week



Vicious Vikings

Meet Scandinavia's most terrifying plunderers

ERIK THE RED 951 – 1003

Infamous for: Being exiled from Iceland for murder. He went on to colonise Greenland

GUTHRUM UNKNOWN – 890

Infamous for: Waging war against the king of the West Saxons - Alfred the Great

INGVAR THE FAR-TRAVELLED UNKNOWN

Infamous for: Pillaging the shores of the Caspian Sea

RODULF HARALDSSON UNKNOWN – 873

Infamous for: Leading raids in Britain, France and Germany

IVAR THE BONELESS UNKNOWN

Infamous for: Invading Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England using the Great Heathen Army

VIKING VOYAGES

As expert ship builders, the Vikings were able to voyage further and wider than any civilisation before...

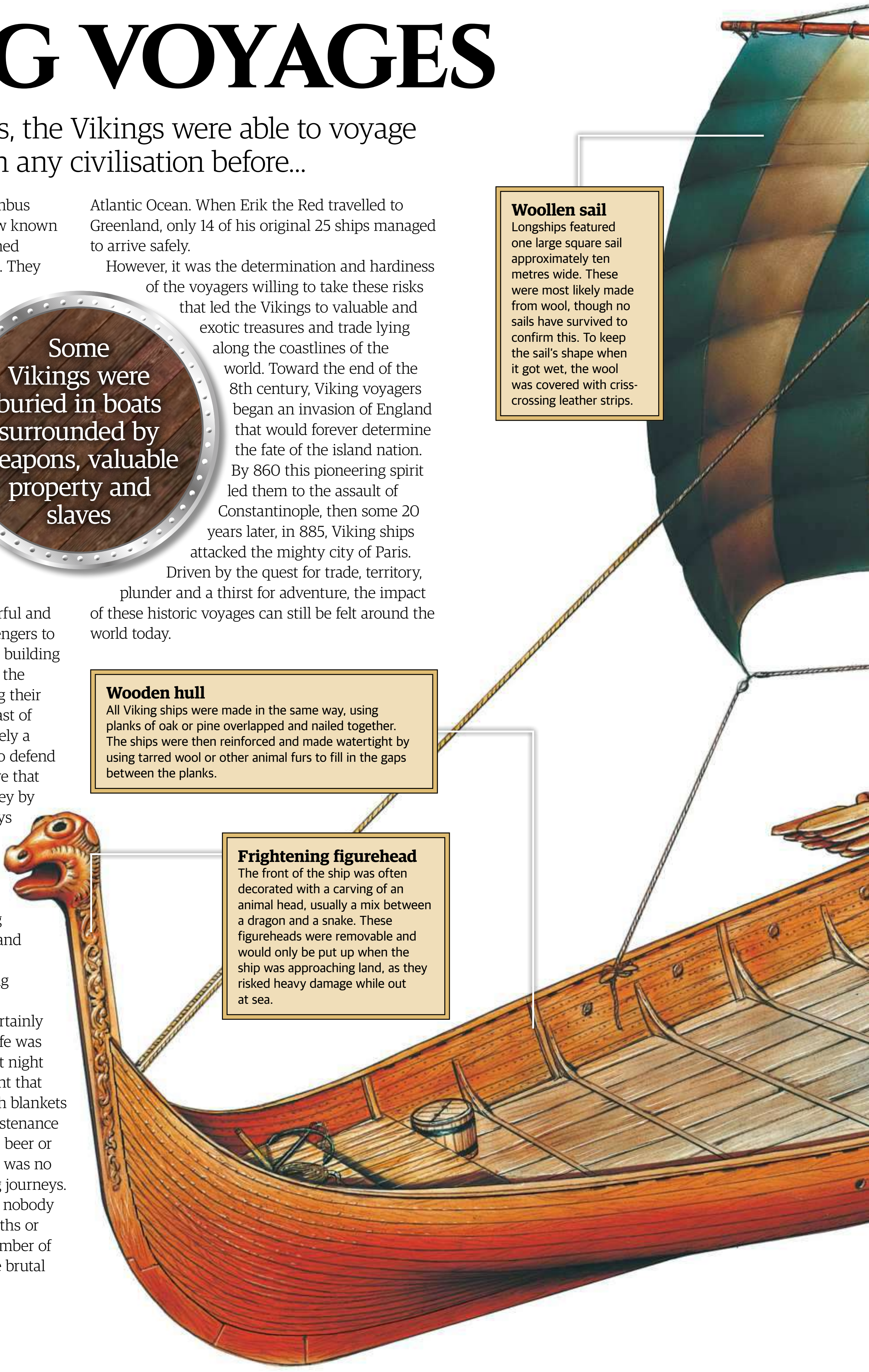
Centuries before Christopher Columbus would stumble upon the land now known as America, the Vikings had claimed the Atlantic Ocean as their own backyard. They had mastered Russia's river system and reached the Middle East; their impressive voyages helped them to become leaders of a rapidly developing world and this new Viking civilisation thrived on the power of a single creation: the ship.

The entire Viking society was built around their ships, which were bigger, lighter and faster than any before. These vessels had been perfected over many years, with the power to brave the vicious storms of the Atlantic Ocean, but also the sleek construction to skim through shallow rivers. These powerful and efficient ships enabled their mighty passengers to create colonies all over the world, and the building and maintaining of these vessels became the basis of Viking society. Vikings were using their mighty sea power to trade around the coast of Europe while the British Empire was merely a collection of scattered kingdoms unable to defend their shores. The Viking sailors were aware that it was often easier to take the same journey by water rather than land, with some journeys taking five days by sea, compared to a month on land, and they used this to their advantage. Longer voyages were carried out by those settling in strange and exciting foreign lands, and the Viking civilisation spread to Iceland, Greenland, and even to Canada and North America.

The image of a Viking longboat crashing through the waves with its fierce dragon figurehead and its long, sleek curves is certainly an inspiring one, but for those onboard, life was not quite so glamorous. With no shelter, at night the sailors used the sail as a makeshift tent that they would sleep under, shivering beneath blankets or animal skin sleeping bags. The only sustenance would be dried or salted meat with water, beer or sour milk to drink. The sinking of vessels was no great tragedy, but rather expected on long journeys. There would be no rescue sent as usually nobody knew about sunken ships for weeks, months or even years. It was not unusual for any number of ships to go missing on voyages across the brutal Atlantic Ocean. When Erik the Red travelled to Greenland, only 14 of his original 25 ships managed to arrive safely.

However, it was the determination and hardiness of the voyagers willing to take these risks that led the Vikings to valuable and exotic treasures and trade lying along the coastlines of the world. Toward the end of the 8th century, Viking voyagers began an invasion of England that would forever determine the fate of the island nation. By 860 this pioneering spirit led them to the assault of Constantinople, then some 20 years later, in 885, Viking ships attacked the mighty city of Paris. Driven by the quest for trade, territory, plunder and a thirst for adventure, the impact of these historic voyages can still be felt around the world today.

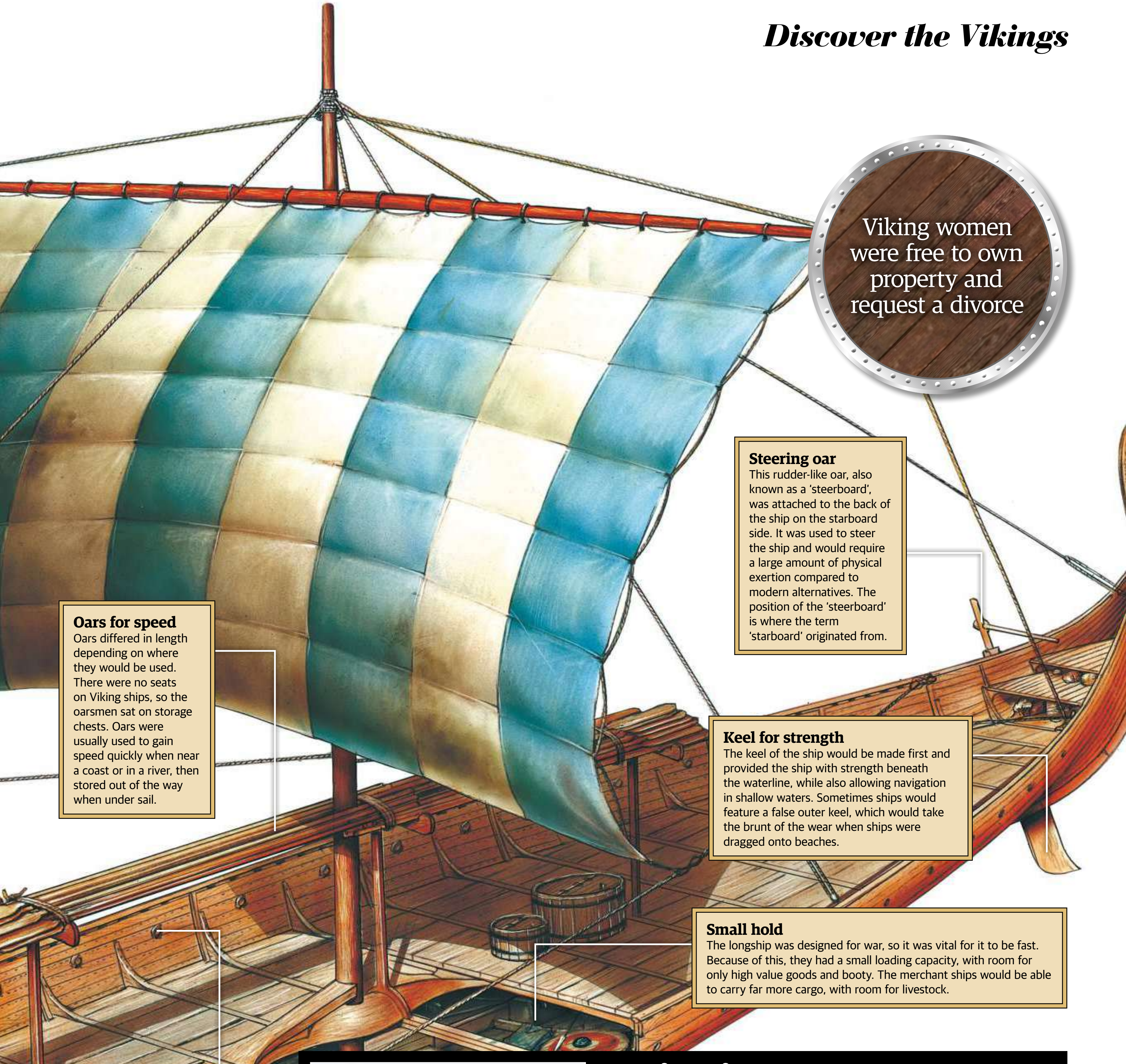
> Some Vikings were buried in boats surrounded by weapons, valuable property and slaves



Woollen sail
Longships featured one large square sail approximately ten metres wide. These were most likely made from wool, though no sails have survived to confirm this. To keep the sail's shape when it got wet, the wool was covered with criss-crossing leather strips.

Wooden hull
All Viking ships were made in the same way, using planks of oak or pine overlapped and nailed together. The ships were then reinforced and made watertight by using tarred wool or other animal furs to fill in the gaps between the planks.

Frightening figurehead
The front of the ship was often decorated with a carving of an animal head, usually a mix between a dragon and a snake. These figureheads were removable and would only be put up when the ship was approaching land, as they risked heavy damage while out at sea.



Viking women were free to own property and request a divorce

Steering oar

This rudder-like oar, also known as a 'steerboard', was attached to the back of the ship on the starboard side. It was used to steer the ship and would require a large amount of physical exertion compared to modern alternatives. The position of the 'steerboard' is where the term 'starboard' originated from.

Oars for speed

Oars differed in length depending on where they would be used. There were no seats on Viking ships, so the oarsmen sat on storage chests. Oars were usually used to gain speed quickly when near a coast or in a river, then stored out of the way when under sail.

Keel for strength

The keel of the ship would be made first and provided the ship with strength beneath the waterline, while also allowing navigation in shallow waters. Sometimes ships would feature a false outer keel, which would take the brunt of the wear when ships were dragged onto beaches.

Small hold

The longship was designed for war, so it was vital for it to be fast. Because of this, they had a small loading capacity, with room for only high value goods and booty. The merchant ships would be able to carry far more cargo, with room for livestock.

Oarports

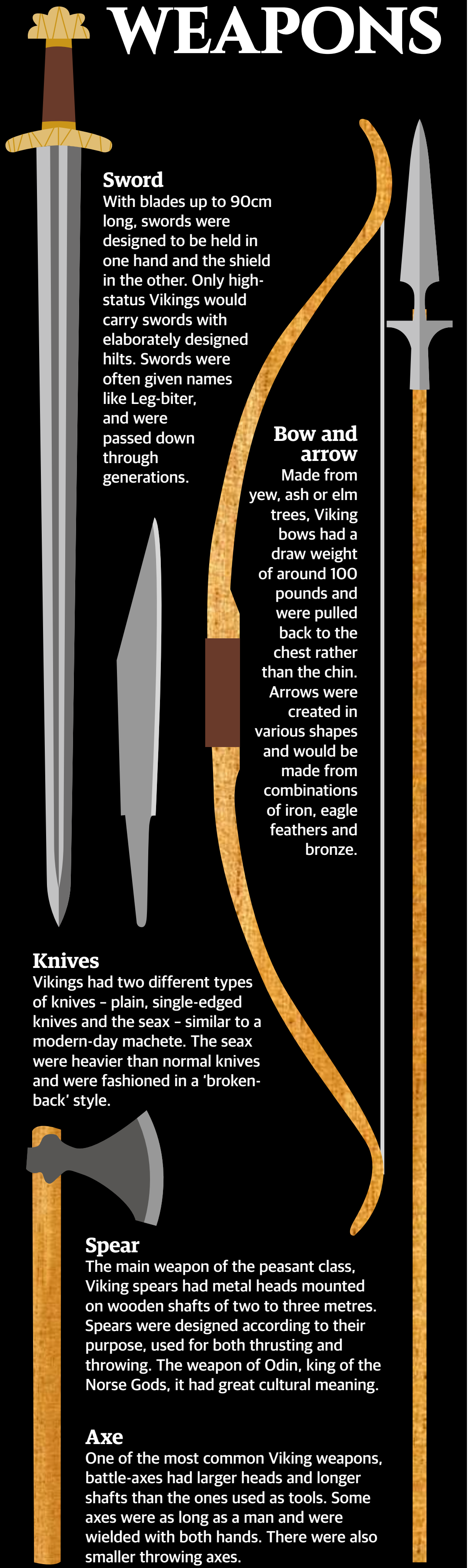
These were holes for the oars that ran along the entire length of the ship on both sides. The holes would also be used to tie shields in place, but only when the ships were in port as the risk of losing their vital protection while the ship was in motion was too great.

Navigation

Before some of the greatest explorers in history were born, Vikings had already navigated their way around the world. But with no compasses, satellites or radios, how did this tribe of Scandinavians manage to map the globe so impressively? The answer is simpler than you might expect – experience. Rather than relying on devices, Viking travellers trusted nature to guide them. They would study the position of the stars and Sun, and even the colour of the sea and movement of the waves would give them indication of how close they were to land. Once a journey was complete, sailors would recount their voyage to others who wished to make the same journey. This ancient wisdom would be passed through generations. The only tools Viking sailors needed were related to the Sun.

For example, a sun-shadow board would be used at noon to check whether the ship was on course. Some theorisethat a sun-stone could be used on foggy days. This stone would change colour to indicate the position of the Sun behind the clouds.

DEADLIEST WEAPONS



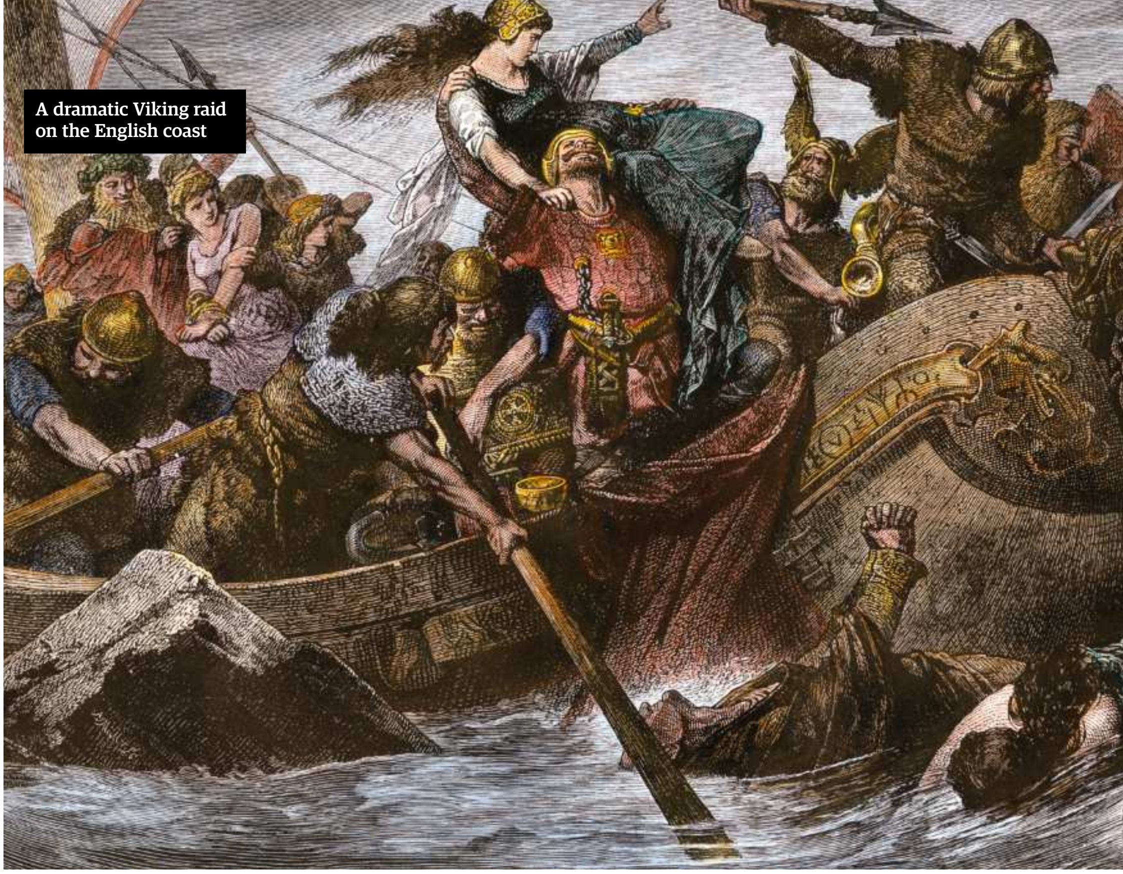
Sword
With blades up to 90cm long, swords were designed to be held in one hand and the shield in the other. Only high-status Vikings would carry swords with elaborately designed hilts. Swords were often given names like Leg-biter, and were passed down through generations.

Bow and arrow
Made from yew, ash or elm trees, Viking bows had a draw weight of around 100 pounds and were pulled back to the chest rather than the chin. Arrows were created in various shapes and would be made from combinations of iron, eagle feathers and bronze.

Knives
Vikings had two different types of knives - plain, single-edged knives and the seax - similar to a modern-day machete. The seax were heavier than normal knives and were fashioned in a 'broken-back' style.

Spear
The main weapon of the peasant class, Viking spears had metal heads mounted on wooden shafts of two to three metres. Spears were designed according to their purpose, used for both thrusting and throwing. The weapon of Odin, king of the Norse Gods, it had great cultural meaning.

Axe
One of the most common Viking weapons, battle-axes had larger heads and longer shafts than the ones used as tools. Some axes were as long as a man and were wielded with both hands. There were also smaller throwing axes.



A dramatic Viking raid on the English coast

RAIDS

No monastery was safe from the fiery scourge that swept over the land from beyond the sea

They had arrived in the dead of night; the darkness had been so thick that the monks had not seen their ship until it landed on the shore. It was too late, they all knew it, to call for help. A brother had run into the halls, waking the monks from their beds with shrill cries of "The demons are here! They're coming! They're coming!" Some of the brothers began to scream for help, while others leapt into action, grabbing precious items and concealing them in the folds of their cloaks. But already the doors were down and already the invaders were here. They were huge - bigger than any man the humble brethren had ever seen - with their wild blond hair and mighty weapons grasped in hand. They leapt upon the monks immediately, hacking at their bodies with a frenzied ferocity. Some pleaded for mercy, some did not have time to plead. There was no time for negotiations; how can one negotiate with pure, unbridled violence? There was only death, destruction and blood as they swung their axes and jabbed their swords. One brother alone had managed to escape the massacre. He speedily wove through the figures and threw himself down into the tall grass outside. He watched as body after body was thrown from the doors of his home; he watched as men still alive were cast off the high cliff into the sea; and he watched as the heathens set the holy walls alight with flame. The hot wind lashed against his face and robes in the flickering darkness. He grasped a golden chalice in his hands numbly, the only thing he had been able to rescue before fleeing. The invaders had the rest of it, all the precious items loaded into sacks on their large ships. And almost as quickly as they had arrived, they slipped away from the shore and returned to the darkness.

In 793, a Viking crew sailing near northeast England raided a Christian monastery at Lindisfarne. For the Vikings the strange, exposed building packed full of valuable treasures was an opportunity too good to miss, but for many in England this shocking and unprovoked attack marked the beginning of the scourge of Viking raids. These sporadic but violent assaults continued across the coasts of England, and by 855 a force known as the Great Heathen Army had arrived in East Anglia. The army made their way across the country, capturing cities as they went, overrunning and overpowering the land. The Scandinavian warriors also launched invasions across the coasts of Ireland and all over mainland Europe. These raids even stretched to the Baltic Sea and Persia. The initial reasons for such rapid expansion are hotly contested between historians, with some believing the raids were a brutal response to the spread of Christianity, or that the Scandinavian population grew too large for their land or perhaps they were the actions of men simply drawn by the thrill of adventure. Whatever the reasons, the invasions left a lasting scar on those who lived to see them.

> Blond was a popular hair colour and Viking men would bleach their hair and beards

How the Vikings raided

1 Preparation
Vikings did not strike haphazardly; instead their raids were planned down to the finest detail. They would first identify a weak target to attack along the coasts which they knew perfectly. Because they had the fastest ships in the world they would launch their attack without any prior warning, ensuring that no help could reach their targets in time. Towards the mid-9th century these attacks had escalated to great fleets of three to four hundred ships.

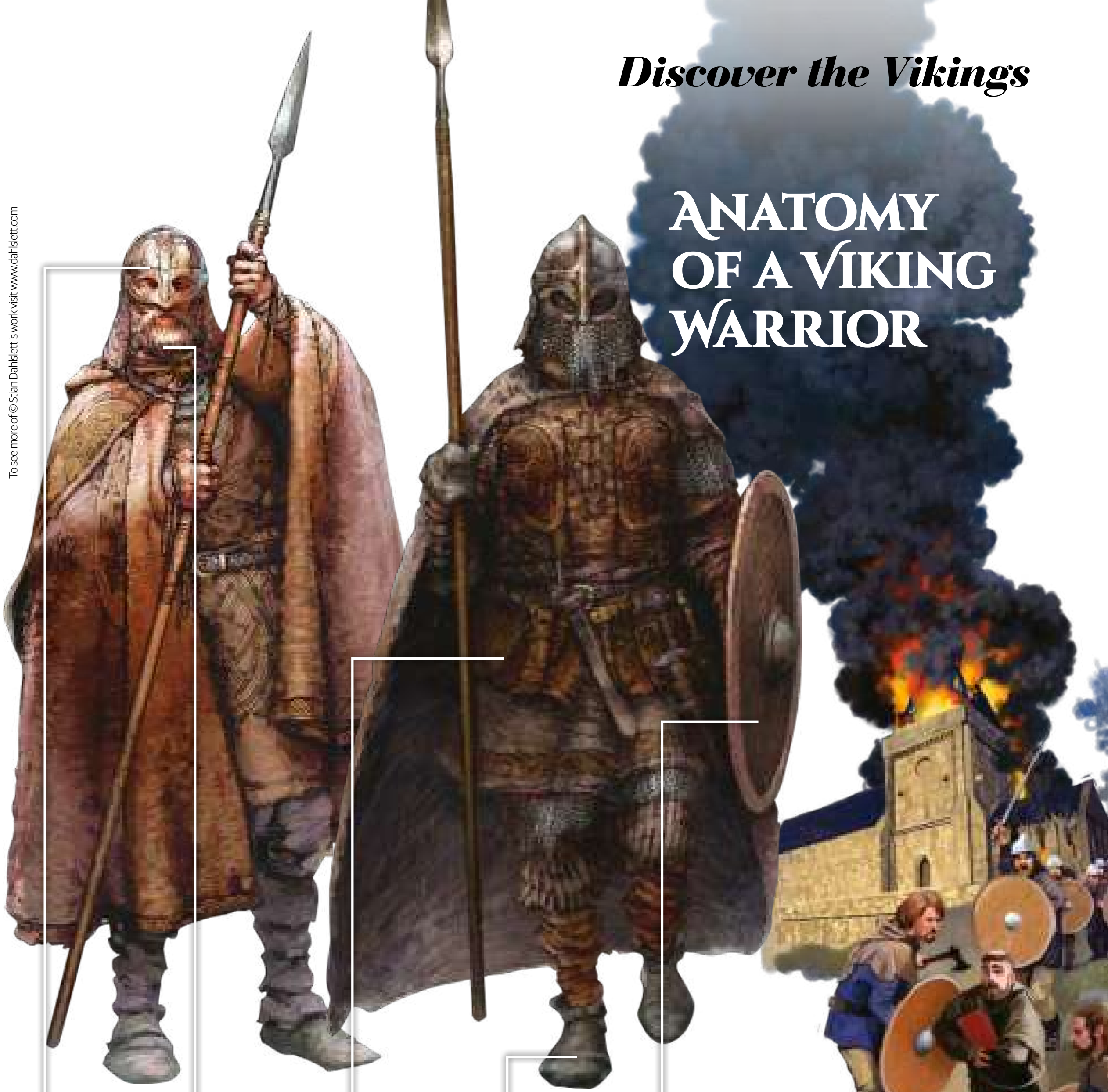
2 Gather horses
Viking ships were designed to row up river, but if the target was some distance away they would leave their ships and travel by horse. With no horses on the ships, they would raid nearby villages for available mounts. These would be used to transport themselves and their booty across the land.

3 Surprise attack
The pious and humble monks did not stand a chance faced with their fierce opponents armed with superior weapons. The well-trained Vikings would launch a sudden furious, vicious attack on the monastery, slaying the holy men. Some would be stripped naked, and cast outside, some taken prisoner, and others thrown into the sea.

4 Loot and burn
Once the monks were dealt with, Vikings ravaged and pillaged everything they could. They plundered any valuables they could get their hands on, including stores of food, but especially precious relics. However, they often ignored the incredibly valuable bibles. Once they had looted the buildings they set fire to the monasteries and the villages surrounding them.

5 Escape
Laden down with their prisoners and booty, the Vikings would ride back to their ships, load them and sail away. They would later sell the gold, jewels and sacred emblems, and the monks would also fetch a high price in the European slave market.

Anatomy of a Viking warrior



To see more of © Stan Dahlslett's work visit www.dahlslett.com

Helmet
Vikings did not, in fact, have horned helmets. Instead, they were round with a guard around the eyes and nose. There is only one complete Viking helmet in existence – others may have been passed down through families then sold for scrap.

Hair
Long hair was favoured by both men and women. It would also be acceptable to shave one's hair or to wear it rolled in a tight bun near the nape of the neck. Men would also carefully groom their moustaches and beards.

Armour
Mail shirts or metal armour would have been very expensive for the average raider, as would leather, so these were reserved only for those of high status. Ordinary Vikings likely fought wearing their everyday clothes, made from wool.

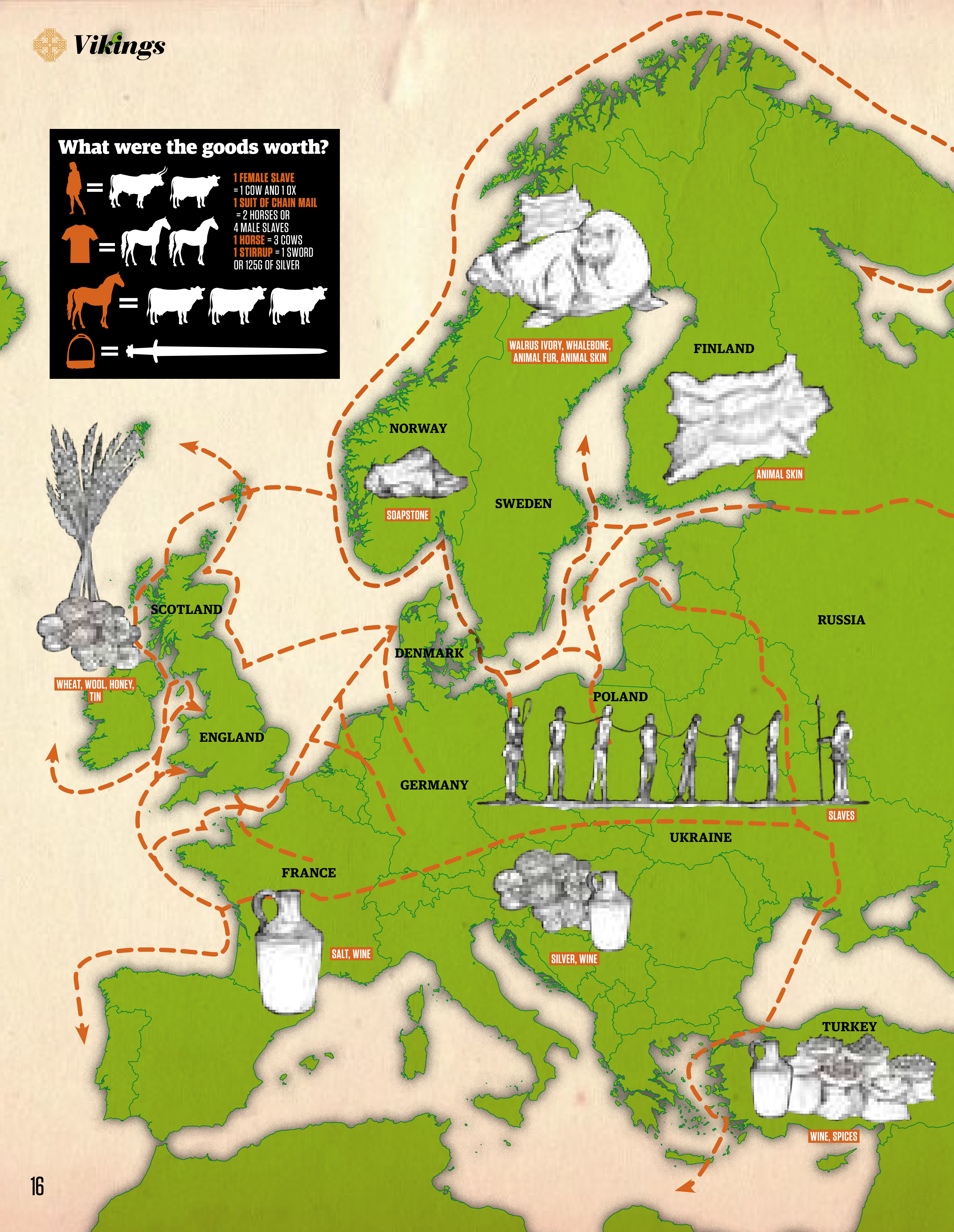
Shoes
Shoes were most often made from one long piece of leather sewn to the shape of the wearer's foot. Leather straps would be used to secure the boot to the foot, and thick woollen socks were worn to keep heat in.

Shield
Round shields were common and were made from light wood, such as fir or poplar and were reinforced with leather or iron around the edge. Round shields could get as large as 120cm in diameter, but most were around 75 to 90cm.

Lindisfarne priory remains a place of pilgrimage to this day

The attack on Lindisfarne

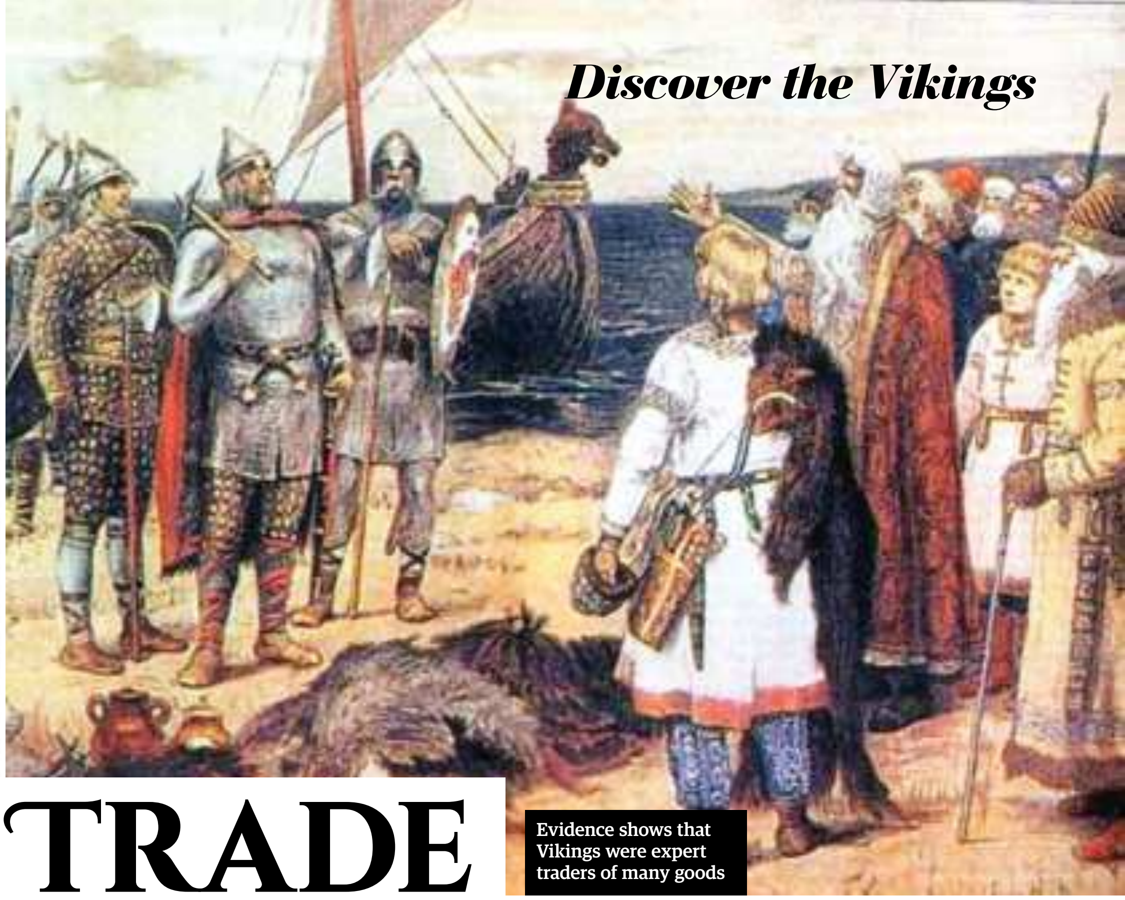
Lindisfarne is a holy island off the northeast coast of England, and during the Middle Ages was the base of Christian evangelising in the north of the country. However, in 793 a Viking raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne sent a wave of dismay to wash over Christians worldwide. On 7 June, Viking raiders invaded the monastery and "destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter." Although the attack was not the first in the country, it was unusual in that it attacked the heart of the Christian nation in the north. A contemporary scholar wrote of the attack, "Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race [...] The heathens poured out the blood of saints around the altar, and trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God, like dung in the streets."



What were the goods worth?

1 FEMALE SLAVE = 1 COW AND 1 OX
1 SUIT OF CHAIN MAIL = 2 HORSES OR 4 MALE SLAVES
1 HORSE = 3 COWS
1 STIRRUP = 1 SWORD OR 125G OF SILVER

WALRUS IVORY, WHALEBONE, ANIMAL FUR, ANIMAL SKIN
FINLAND
NORWAY
ANIMAL SKIN
SWEDEN
SOAPSTONE
SCOTLAND
RUSSIA
DENMARK
WHEAT, WOOL, HONEY, TIN
POLAND
ENGLAND
GERMANY
SLAVES
UKRAINE
FRANCE
SALT, WINE
SILVER, WINE
TURKEY
WINE, SPICES



Evidence shows that Vikings were expert traders of many goods

TRADE

Vikings were not powered by brutality, but instead a complex and prosperous trade network

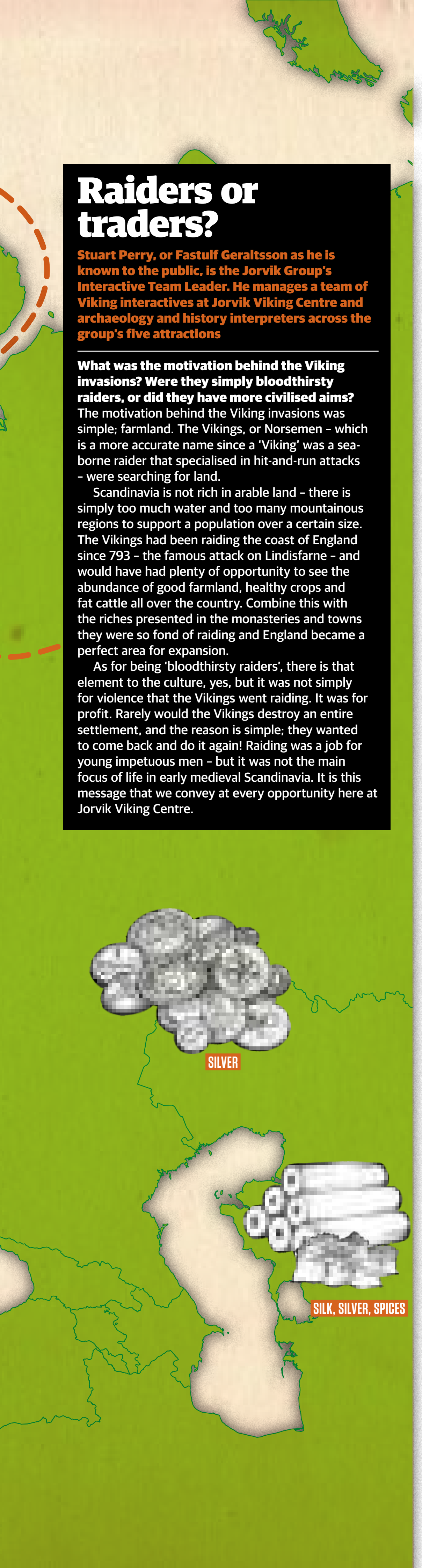
Although raiding and pillaging provided a quick intake of wealth, it was not a stable way to live or to build a civilisation. Instead, the Vikings dedicated far more of their time to building up a prosperous and powerful trading network. Because of their superior ship-building skills they were able to travel to trade in faraway lands, obtaining a host of exotic and valuable goods. Their specially designed trading ships were able to carry up to 35 tonnes of cargo, including silver and even livestock.

Trading markets began to emerge along the west Baltic Sea in the mid-8th century, where people came from far and wide to trade an array of goods. As these markets flourished, traders decided to settle permanently along the routes and they transformed into trading towns. Birka in Sweden, Kaupang in Norway and Hedeby in Denmark all grew to be prosperous and bustling trading settlements, with the inhabitants all working as craftsmen and merchants. Prosperous trading routes also emerged along the British Isles, with York and Dublin developing into major trading centres. As the trade boom increased the Vikings travelled further afield, across the Baltic Sea and along the Russian rivers. They founded more trading towns in Kiev and Novgorod. The Viking traders even went as far as Istanbul, the capital of the mighty Byzantine Empire across the Black Sea. This perilous journey was one only the Vikings dared attempt, through vicious rapids and battling hostile natives. The Vikings continued their trading journey inland, bringing their goods to Jerusalem and Baghdad. The lure of the Silk Road and the exotic riches of the East were too good to resist, and Vikings met with traders from the Far East in their trading centres in Russia, trading fur and slaves for silk and spices.

Silver coins were the most common form of payment, but this was unlike today's currency where different coins are worth a particular value. The coins were weighed in scales to determine their value; this is because a lot of coins were melted down and crafted into intricate and beautiful jewellery to trade on. The great extent of the Viking trade network can be seen today in the hoards of silver coins, created in England, which have been found in Sweden, not to mention the 40,000 Arabic coins and the 38,000 German coins also uncovered there. Nordic bowls, Mediterranean silk and Baltic axe heads have even been discovered buried under English soil.

Viking wedding celebrations were huge occasions and could last for over a week

This vast and illustrious trade network attracted a wealth of eager and talented artists and craftsmen. Viking bead-makers would import glass from Western Europe to create an array of simple and decorative beads for the wealthy to adorn themselves with, while the ample supply of amber from the Baltic lands was fashioned into pendants and playing pieces. Skilled Viking craftsmen transformed their imported bronze to fine ornaments and mass-produced brooches, and deer antlers could even be used to make delicate and beautiful combs.



Raiders or traders?

Stuart Perry, or Fastulf Geraltsson as he is known to the public, is the Jorvik Group's Interactive Team Leader. He manages a team of Viking interactives at Jorvik Viking Centre and archaeology and history interpreters across the group's five attractions

What was the motivation behind the Viking invasions? Were they simply bloodthirsty raiders, or did they have more civilised aims?
The motivation behind the Viking invasions was simple; farmland. The Vikings, or Norsemen – which is a more accurate name since a 'Viking' was a sea-borne raider that specialised in hit-and-run attacks – were searching for land.

Scandinavia is not rich in arable land – there is simply too much water and too many mountainous regions to support a population over a certain size. The Vikings had been raiding the coast of England since 793 – the famous attack on Lindisfarne – and would have had plenty of opportunity to see the abundance of good farmland, healthy crops and fat cattle all over the country. Combine this with the riches presented in the monasteries and towns they were so fond of raiding and England became a perfect area for expansion.

As for being 'bloodthirsty raiders', there is that element to the culture, yes, but it was not simply for violence that the Vikings went raiding. It was for profit. Rarely would the Vikings destroy an entire settlement, and the reason is simple; they wanted to come back and do it again! Raiding was a job for young impetuous men – but it was not the main focus of life in early medieval Scandinavia. It is this message that we convey at every opportunity here at Jorvik Viking Centre.

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LOST KINGDOMS OF THE VIKINGS

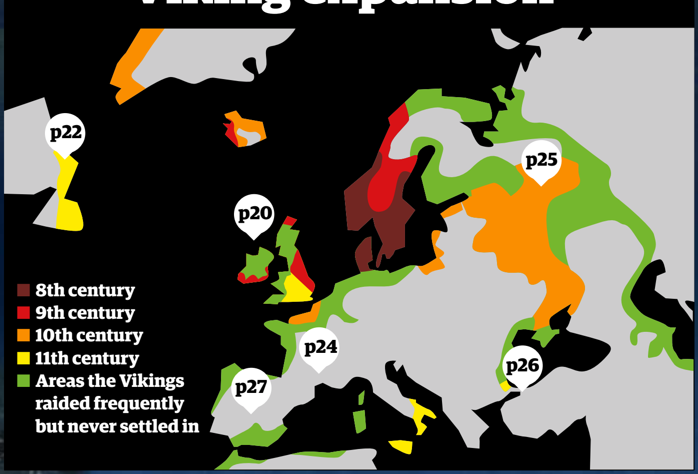
From Canada to Constantinople, the Norse raiders pillaged and plundered the known world in search of treasure and territory

Written by Jack Griffiths

Often portrayed as bloodthirsty raiders, the Vikings were a civilisation that travelled to more of the Early Medieval world than anyone else. Originating from Scandinavia, they branched out into mainland Europe to find food, land and riches, establishing kingdoms across the known world. For hundreds of years a fleet of longships on the horizon struck fear into the hearts of European peoples like the Franks, Saxons and Byzantines. The men from the north were traders as well as raiders, though, and commerce helped fund their lengthy expeditions. Bringing with them fur, wool and whalebone, they traded their goods for silver, silk and spices, which they then sold on. To trade or raid? It all hinged on the best way to make profit.

The Vikings are perhaps most famous for their attacks on the British Isles, the forced establishment of the Danelaw and battles against Alfred the Great. However, they sailed their longships all across Europe and ruled over many diverse lands. They even made forays into parts of Asia, America and Africa. From Newfoundland in the west to Kiev in the east, the Norsemen braved treacherous oceans and faced deadly adversaries. They may have seemed like savages, but it's the Norsemen we have to thank for the establishment and development of many of the European kingdoms that flourished after their decline.

Viking expansion



- ■ 8th century
- ■ 9th century
- ■ 10th century
- ■ 11th century
- ■ Areas the Vikings raided frequently but never settled in

IRELAND

For more than 200 years the Vikings exerted influence over vast swathes of the Emerald Isle

Norwegian Norsemen first appeared in Ireland at the end of the 8th century with a hit-and-run attack on a monastery on either Rathlin or Lambay Island. These sporadic coastal attacks continued for 30 years, and despite later spreading to the mainland, actually had no great effect on the Irish settlements that would rebuild during the lulls in fighting. At this stage, the marauders were content with staging assaults that lasted no longer than a few days before returning to Scandinavia to sell their spoils. At the start of the next century, however, the Vikings grew in confidence and the pillaging intensified. Ship enclosures (known as longphorts) were established in Dublin, and these fixed positions allowed the raiders to ravage the countryside at will. It wasn't long until Irish kings had had enough. The king of Tara, Máel Seachnaill, took the fight back to the Vikings, and near Skreen in County Meath, killed no less than 700 Nordic raiders.

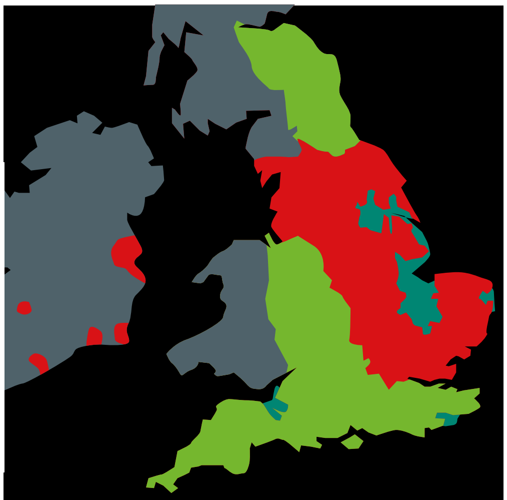
The increase in assaults had a profound effect on the Celtic-Irish society for more than two centuries. Norse-Irish alliances became common, but by the start of the 10th century, Vikings from Denmark were added to the mix. To differentiate, Vikings from Norway were known as the 'Lochlainn' and the Danish Norsemen as the 'Danair'. The Viking success on the British Isles only increased the number of attacks, and in the years leading up to 1000, they tactically used their longships to travel up rivers and attack further inland. The Norwegians dominated initially, financed by all the monasteries they plundered, but the disorganised nature of their attacks meant the Danes' power base grew steadily.

On the Irish side, one man rose above the others, the king of Munster, Brian Boru. With his support base in the southern kingdom, Brian assembled a unified confederate army, which imposed itself as the major force in the region. The army destroyed Dublin's fortress, allied with many of the Viking leaders and was even powerful enough to expel several Norse clans from Ireland entirely. Brian claimed kingship in league with the Dublin Norse, and no one dared challenge him. His supremacy lasted until 1012, when a series of intense Viking attacks culminated in the critical Battle of Clontarf in 1014.

Taking place on 23 April, Clontarf was a battle between the majority of the Irish kingdoms led by Brian against Vikings supported by Mael Morda, the king of Leinster, who had switched allegiances after a dispute. Brian had approximately 7,000 troops at his disposal, and they marched to Dublin to engage 4,000 Leinster men and 3,000 Norsemen who had landed on the shoreline at sunrise. As the armies brawled, Morda's men scored an early advantage as his vicious Viking centre proved devastatingly effective. The pendulum swung in the other direction, however, when the Viking champions Brodir and Sigurd were defeated. As afternoon came, Brian's men managed to cut off the Viking access to their longships. This was a critical blow to Morda's forces, who began to flee towards the one bridge over the nearby River Liffey to safety. As they tried to escape, the returning Máel Seachnaill and his men emerged and cut off access to the bridge. The Vikings and the Leinster men were now trapped and subsequently routed.

The battle was the bloodiest single conflict in ancient Irish history. Brian lay dead in the mud with 4,000 of his own men and, crucially, 6,000 Leinster men and Vikings lay slaughtered alongside them. The battle resulted in the end of a period of great turmoil in Ireland and initiated a time of relative peace in which the Irish and the remaining Vikings lived together. The Norsemen who stayed in Ireland were absorbed into Irish culture and started to intermarry. The Danish kingdom of Dublin had stood for more than 200 years prior to Clontarf, but just 52 years later, Harald Hardrada would lose at Stamford Bridge and the great Viking age of the British Isles would be over.

Historic Viking settlements can be easily identified by '-by' and '-thorpe' suffixes, which in Old Norse meant homestead and farm. Therefore, cities and towns such as Derby, Grimsby, Whitby and Scunthorpe were once Nordic settlements.

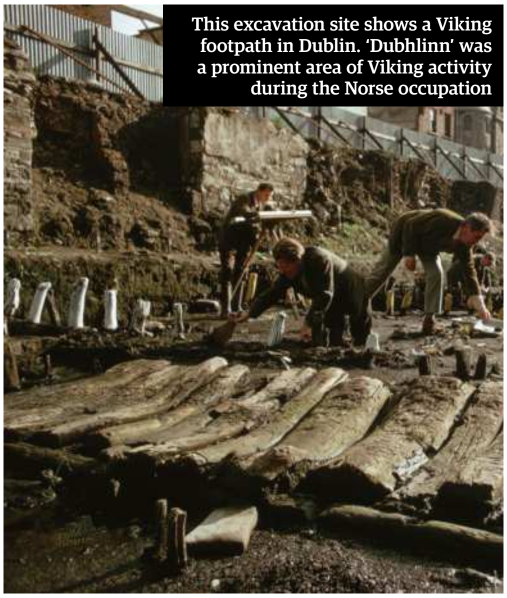


🟩 **English territory** 🟥 **Danish or Norse territory**
▨ **Celtic lands** 🟩 **Swamp**

Vikings in the British Isles

The areas of Viking conquest that became known as the Danelaw

The first significant Viking attack on the British Isles was in 793, when the Vikings carried out a brutal raid on the island monastery of Lindisfarne. The almost constant assaults on Britain's coastline over the next few centuries were too much for the Anglo-Saxons, and Celts, who surrendered a vast swathe of land to the Norse raiders.



This excavation site shows a Viking footpath in Dublin. 'Dubhlinn' was a prominent area of Viking activity during the Norse occupation

The theories behind the Viking expansion

Exhausted farmland

Scandinavia has a variety of landscapes but none were ideal for farming. Norway was too mountainous, Sweden had extensive forests, while Denmark could be too sandy.

Desire for treasure

Searching far-off lands for plunder is something the Vikings became associated with. Raids were carried out overseas and a settlement would be built to cement their claim to the loot.

Overcrowding

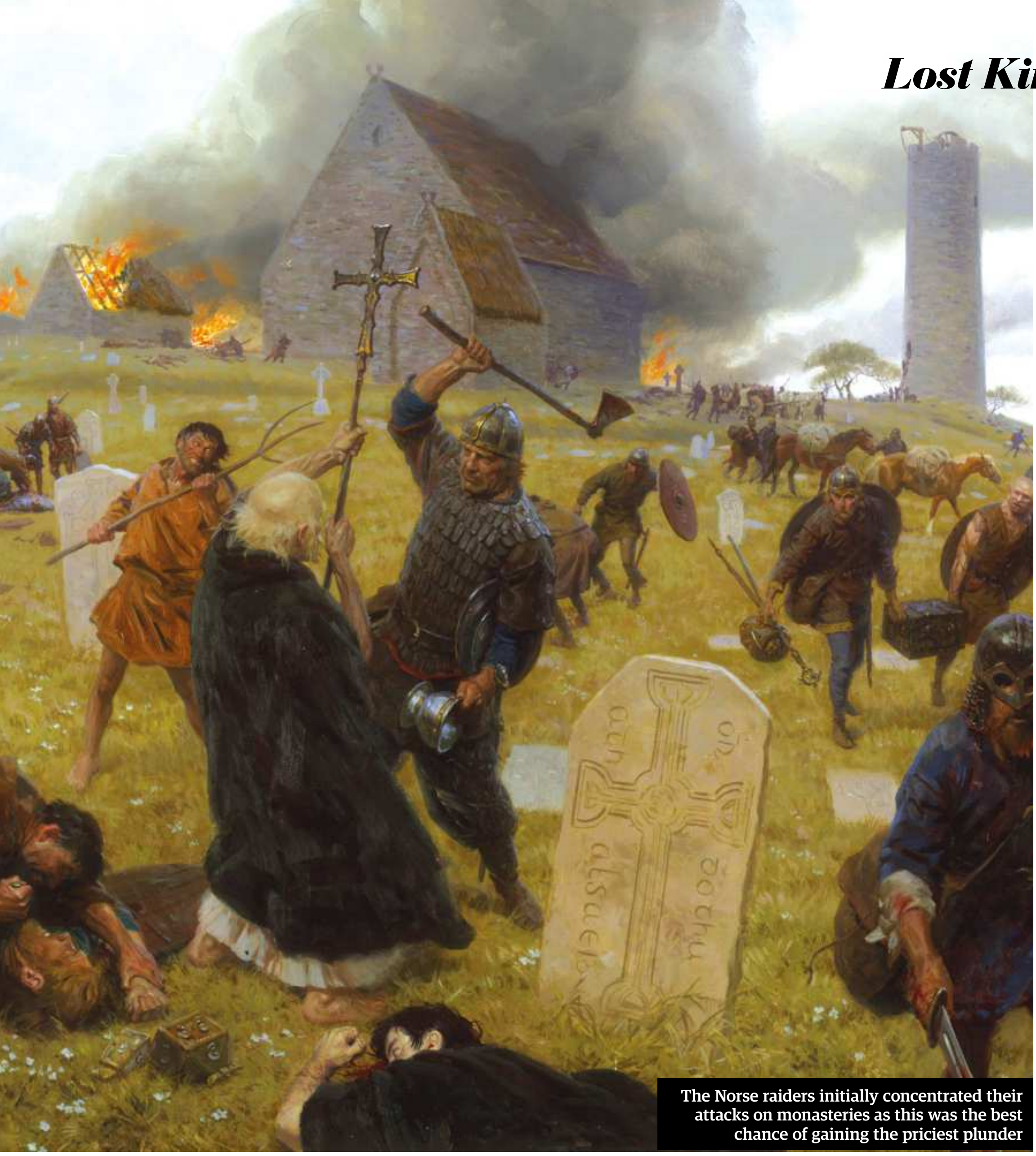
As the Viking population swelled, many sought to move elsewhere. The eldest son inherited family lands, so younger brothers would venture in search of territory to call their own.

Wanderlust

A sense of adventure was a common Viking trait. Even when the treasure dried up, the Norsemen were keen to seek out new lands in far-off places like America and Constantinople.

New trade routes

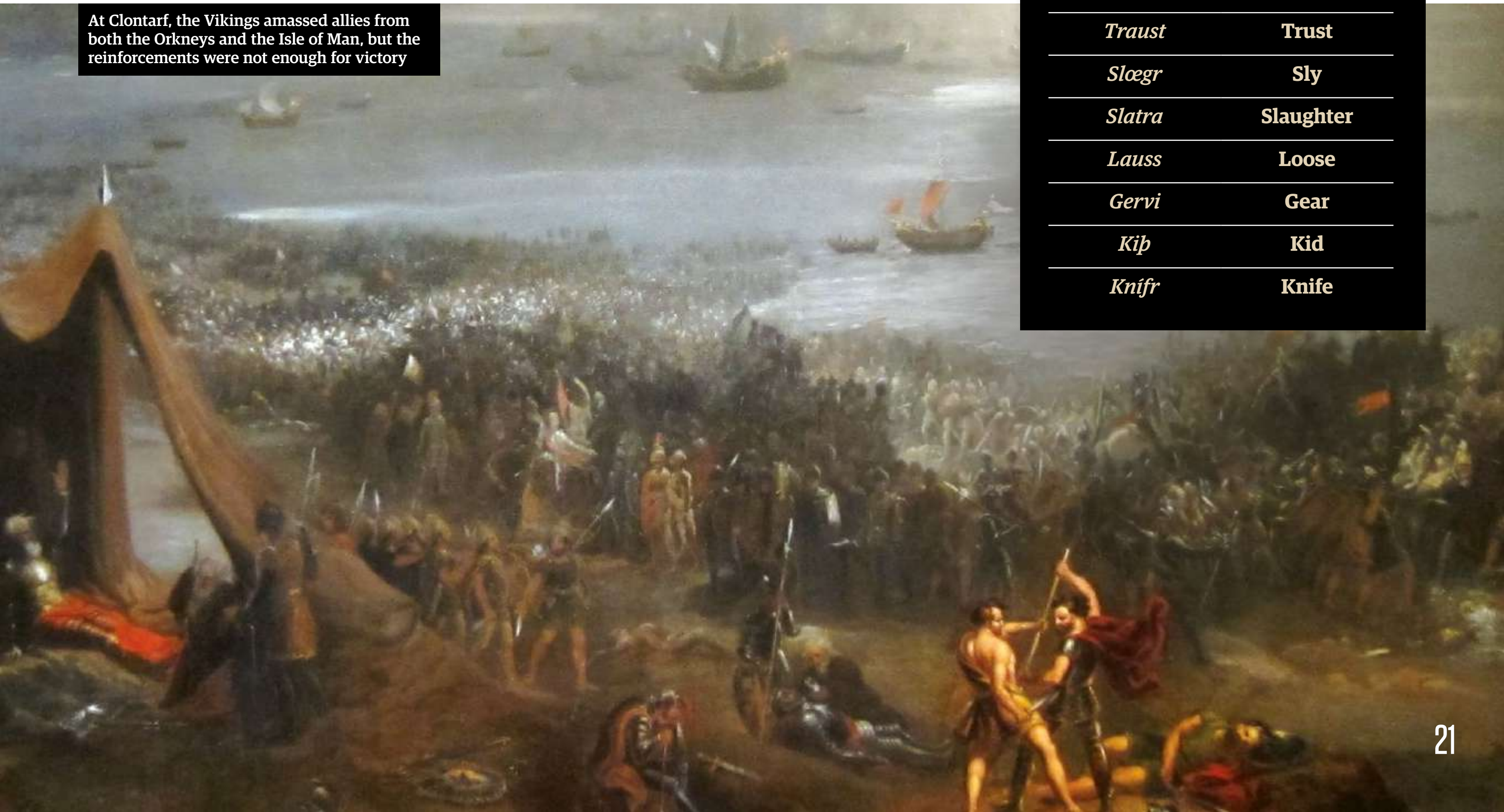
The popularity of Christianity meant that many of the nearby Christian kingdoms refused to trade. As a result, the pagan Vikings would either invade the lands or look elsewhere for trade.



The Norse raiders initially concentrated their attacks on monasteries as this was the best chance of gaining the priciest plunder

Norse words that invaded the English language

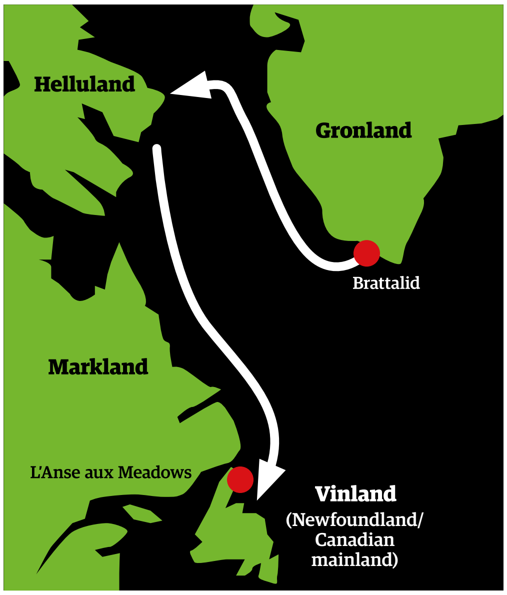
OLD NORSE	Modern English
Sala	Sale
Klubba	Club
Beit	Snack
Rannsaka	Ransack
Fiall	Hill
Berserkr	Berserk
Hloppa	Flea
Burðr	Birth
Kalla	Call
Kasta	Cast
Krafla	Crawl
Hús bóndi	Husband
Leggr	Leg
Uggr	Ugly
Rotinn	Rotten
Renna	Run
Traust	Trust
Slœgr	Sly
Slatra	Slaughter
Lauss	Loose
Gervi	Gear
Kiþ	Kid
Knífr	Knife



At Clontarf, the Vikings amassed allies from both the Orkneys and the Isle of Man, but the reinforcements were not enough for victory

North America

With parts of Northern Europe ransacked, the Vikings turned their attention to the other side of the Atlantic



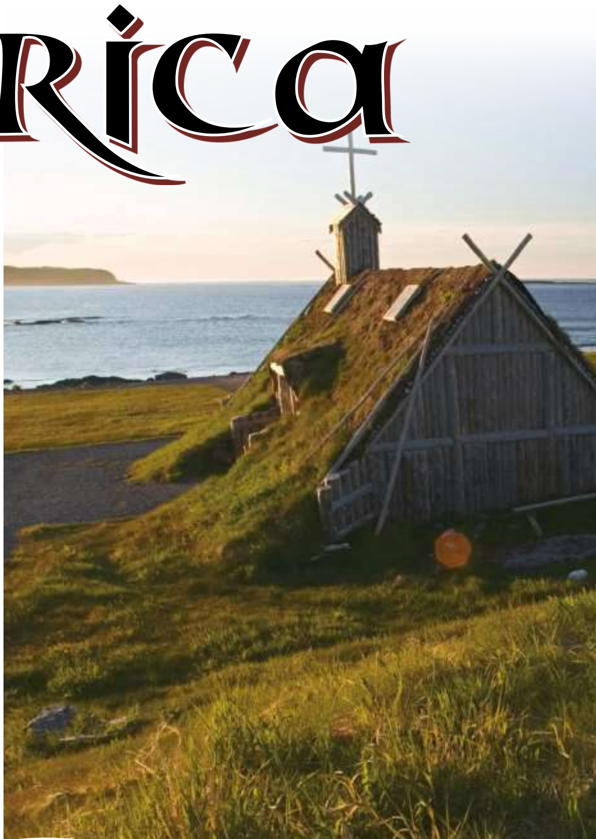
The true extent of the Viking presence on North America is hotly debated, but it will always be one of the greatest achievements of maritime exploration. After the Norse Vikings populated Iceland in about 870, Greenland was next to follow, with its conquest instigated in the 980s by the notorious Erik the Red. The rough seas of the Atlantic were much tougher than the Vikings had previously experienced on the North Sea. To combat the difficult conditions, the Norse mariners used a type of ship known as a knarr. Larger than the standard longship, it could carry much more cargo and would stand up to whatever the Atlantic had to throw at it. This allowed for longer and more fruitful journeys. By 1150, 72,000 Norsemen were living in Iceland while 5,000 resided in Greenland.

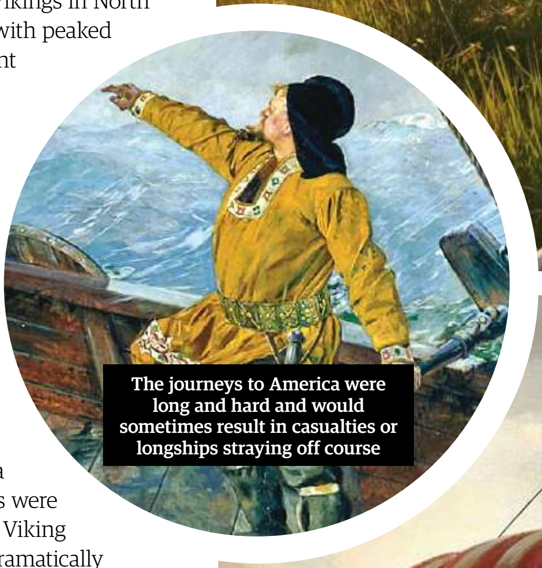
The adventuring continued, and the first Viking sightings of North America came in about 985, when Icelander Bjarni Herjólfsson spotted uncharted land after being blown off course on his way to Greenland. The stories of a new land encouraged others to seek it out. In about 1000, Leif Eriksson, the son of Erik the Red, was the first to set foot on this unexplored territory. Eriksson and his 35-man crew may have been sent by Norwegian king Olaf I to spread Christianity (Olaf was one of the first Vikings to preach the ideas of the religion) and discovered three places around the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Eriksson named them Helluland (land of flat rocks), Markland (land of forest and timber) and Vinland (land of warmth and vines). We know them today as Baffin Island, the Labrador coast and Newfoundland.

After this initial excursion, the westward journeys only continued. The most extensive voyage was undertaken by Thorfinn Karlsefni, who intended to settle in this new found land for good, taking more than 100 men and women as well as tools, weapons and farm animals on his expedition. His wife gave birth to the first child from the old world to be born in the new. As more Vikings made the journey, it was inevitable they would make contact with the native population. Norse men and women called the natives Skrælingjar and became trading partners, benefiting from the fur given to them by the locals. The Skrælingjar were a pre-Iron Age civilisation and most likely the ancestors of the modern Inuit. They were given their first taste of iron weaponry and tools by these visitors from across the sea.

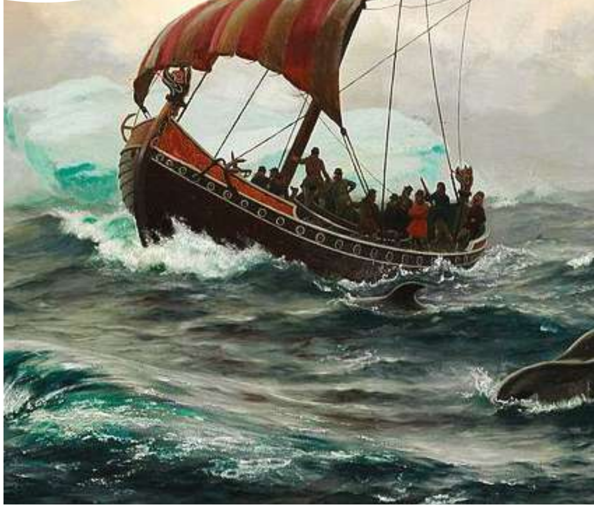
The settlements built by the Vikings in North America consisted of sod walls with peaked timber roofs. The most prominent settlement, and what is seen as proof of Viking occupation, is L'Anse aux Meadows. Located on the northern tip of Vinland, the area is believed to have been home to about 75 people and would have probably acted as a base camp for repairing ships. After approximately two or three years of attempted colonisation, the Skrælingjar began to see the Vikings as a threat and unrest broke out. As a result of the violence, trade visits were no longer a worthwhile venture. Viking activity in North America was dramatically reduced, as the settlements in Greenland could no longer support further trade missions that lost both men and valuable resources. Greenland wasn't a fully functioning Norse colony, and these less than favourable economic conditions made journeys to North America more and more difficult.

The Viking failure to colonise the Americas on a long-term basis was due to both natural hazards and native resistance, but also confirmed the limitations of nautical conquest in the early Middle Ages. The distance from Greenland to Vinland is about 3,500 kilometres, which was a tough journey for any Medieval vessel, and the small population didn't have the manpower to overpower the natives. They may have discovered North America 500 years before Columbus, but the Vikings were unable to sustain a stable colony in the New World.





The journeys to America were long and hard and would sometimes result in casualties or longships straying off course



The Vikings made it to Greenland in 982 and established both eastern and western settlements with about 300 farmsteads

Norse technology was not significantly more advanced than that of the natives meaning the Vikings found it difficult to assert their authority

What became of Vinland?

Expert bio: Dr Alex Sanmark is reader in Medieval Archaeology at the Centre for Nordic Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands. She specialises in various aspects of the Viking Age, from religion to law and gender, both in Scandinavia and the Norse settlements in the north Atlantic.

How important is L'Anse aux Meadows to our understanding of Viking settlements in the New World?
It is hugely important because it is the only Viking settlement in the New World. There are other types of archaeological evidence though. Two Icelandic sagas, for instance, tell us about the Vikings sailing to Vinland from Greenland and Iceland. This has, of course, spurred people's imagination, and many have been looking for evidence of Viking presence a lot further south, especially in the US. Others have faked the evidence by producing their own runic inscriptions. The Viking settlement of the New World is an important political issue for some who are keen to show that 'Europeans' were there from early on. The sagas are highly problematic as sources as they are very late, dating from the 13th century onwards, and they are also literature, meaning that they don't necessarily tell us exactly what happened. We can't rely on them for evidence, so this settlement is of great importance.

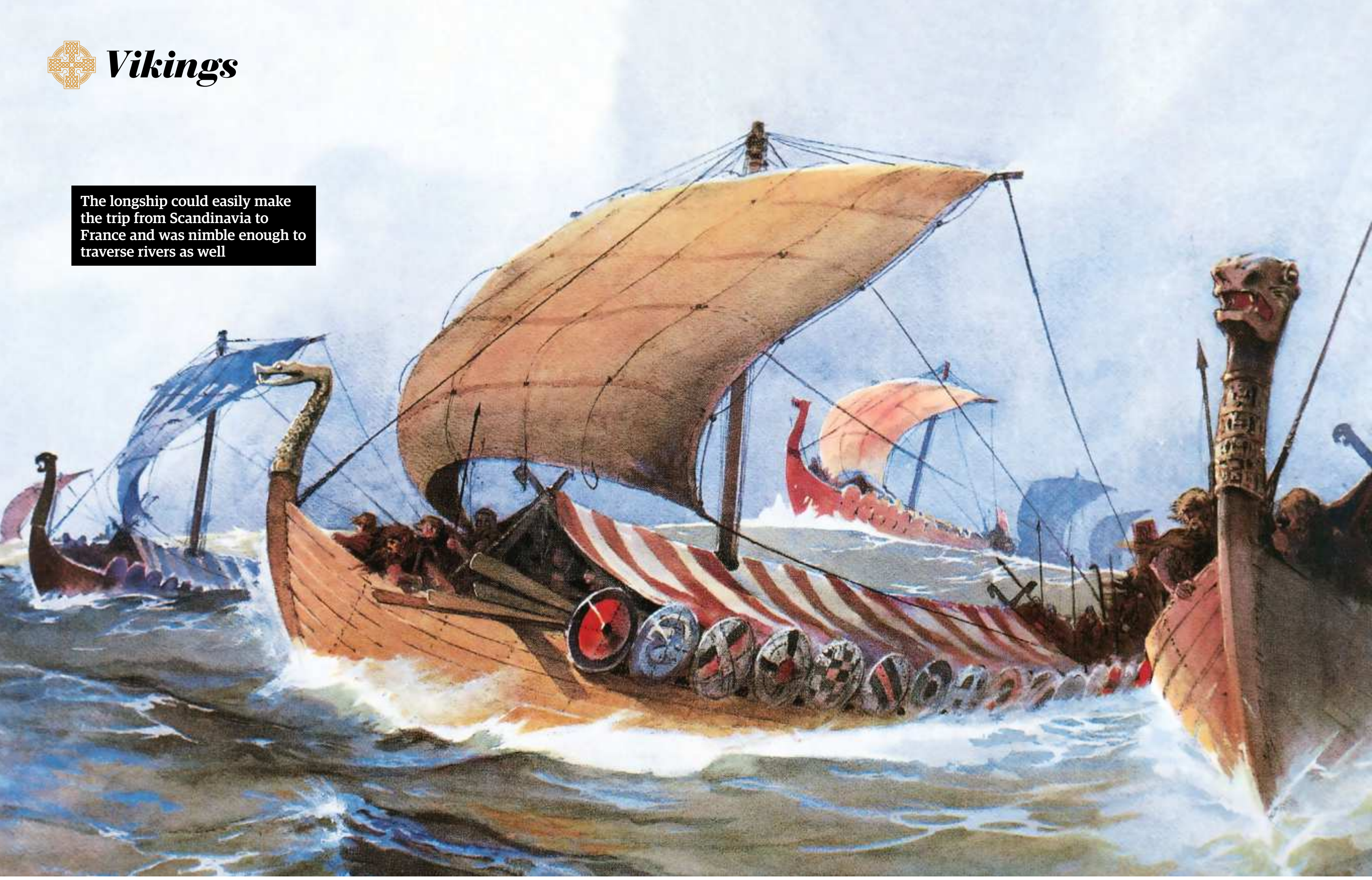
Are there any similar Viking settlements to L'Anse aux Meadows in the Americas?
No, but a possible Viking camp has been identified on Baffin Island in recent years. There is also an increasing amount of archaeological evidence from Canada that shows that the Vikings were there and traded with the natives. It is possible that established trading networks were in place and the Vikings may well have travelled a lot further inland than previously thought. Viking presence is above all traced through artefacts that the native people did not have, such as finds of metal, strike-a-lights and woollen cloth. These finds are important as they point to friendly interactions, which is not always the image provided by the written sources.

Why did the Vikings survive hundreds of years in Greenland but could not establish themselves in Vinland, with its richer resources and better climate?
The settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows was probably never intended to be permanent, but rather a base for resources, such as wood, which they could not get in Greenland. The Vikings seem to have stayed there for short periods of time as the number of Norse in Greenland was never very large, and setting up a new colony would have required a substantial group of people to be successful. Also, L'Anse aux Meadows was not a very useful area for resources that were unavailable in Greenland, for these the Vikings had to travel quite far inland. The journey between Greenland and Canada was long and could take up to a month, which of course made regular journeys between the two areas difficult. It may be, although there is no evidence to prove this, that the relationship with the natives was so difficult that the settlement was abandoned.

> "The settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows was probably never intended to be permanent, but rather a base for resources"

What were relations with the Native Americans like?
We don't know very much about this. The sagas tell us both about trading with the native population and about fights between them. On the other hand, there is increasing evidence of interaction between the two groups and it may be that the whole situation was a lot more positive than the image provided by the sagas. The sagas are literature after all, and it may have been more interesting to describe fighting than trading. In view of recent archaeological finds, I'm sure more evidence will be appearing in the future.

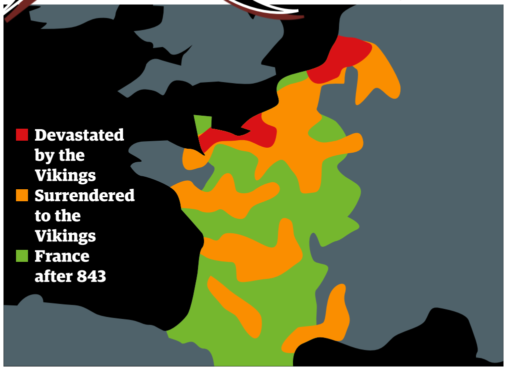
How could a longship or a knarr make it all the way across the Atlantic?
It may seem strange to us that people set out across the North Atlantic in open ships, but we need to see this in its context. It was of course a very long and dangerous journey, and the sagas contain stories about ships being lost on the way. People in the Viking age were, however, very used to travelling in this way and they didn't start by crossing the Atlantic. People in Scandinavia were using ships with sails from the early Iron Age and developed their ships and sailing skills over several hundred years. They were extremely talented seamen and knew when and how to sail, following currents, fish and seabirds.



The longship could easily make the trip from Scandinavia to France and was nimble enough to traverse rivers as well

FRANCE

Across the Channel, Vikings threatened the Franks in Normandy, Brittany and Aquitaine



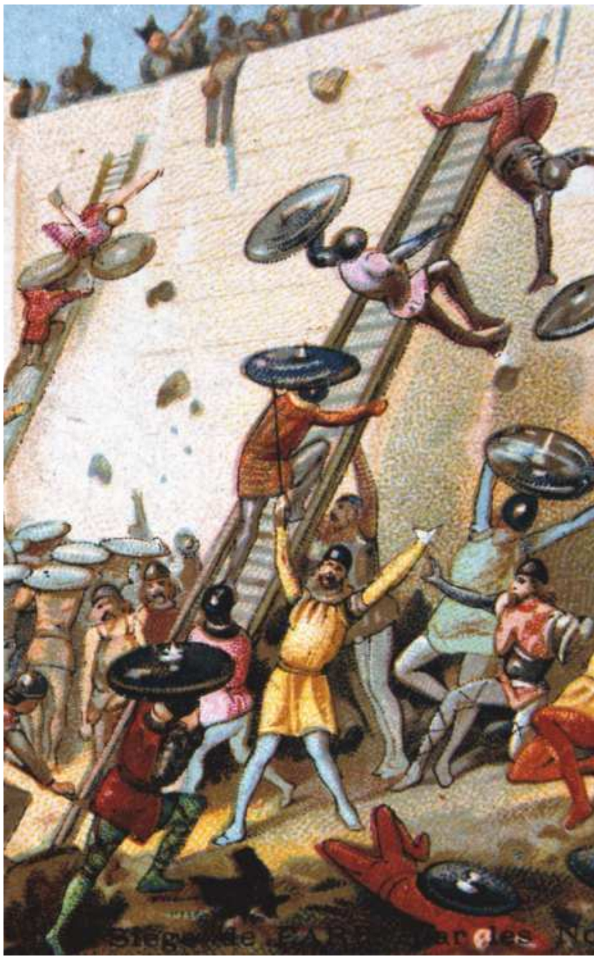
By the end of the 9th century, Vikings from Denmark had increased the amount of coastal assaults on Western Europe and would proceed to populate significant amounts of territory in Normandy, Brittany and Aquitaine. Their leader, Reginherus or Ragnar, thought by some to be the legendary figure Ragnar Lodbrok described in Old Norse poetry, had the confidence and the audacity to siege Paris in 845.

Ragnar led an army of 120 longships and 5,000 warriors – fierce men who had already scorched the earth all over Europe. After plundering Rouen, the siege of Paris began on 28 March. Although the attackers were stopped in their tracks by a plague that spread through the camp, they still managed to take the city, and were only stopped from burning it to the ground by a last-ditch Frankish ransom of 7,000 pounds of silver.

Despite being primarily Danish territory, a Norwegian leader emerged by the name of Hrölfr, or, as he is more commonly known, Rollo. Already a veteran of conflicts on the British Isles, his military forces besieged the city of Chartres, forcing the king of the Franks, Charles III, to sign the Treaty of Saint Clair-sur-Epte in 911, granting Rollo feudal rights in the area around Rouen.

Viking land now stretched from Normandy in the north to Aquitaine in the south, and remained under Viking control for about two centuries. Even though they had foreign invaders in their lands, this was actually of benefit to the Franks as it meant the Norsemen would effectively provide them with a buffer zone against coastal invasions from other enemies of the realm.

It was not long until Christianity and Frankish customs started to take over from Nordic culture. Rollo himself was baptised and the Normans that invaded England in 1066 were descendants of the Normandy Vikings. The Medieval French word for a Scandinavian is 'Normand', a term that was then given to the area (Normandy) and the people that inhabited it (Normans). Harald Hardrada may have been defeated at Stamford Bridge, but William the Conqueror's forces that were victorious at Hastings were more Norse than many think.



RUSSIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

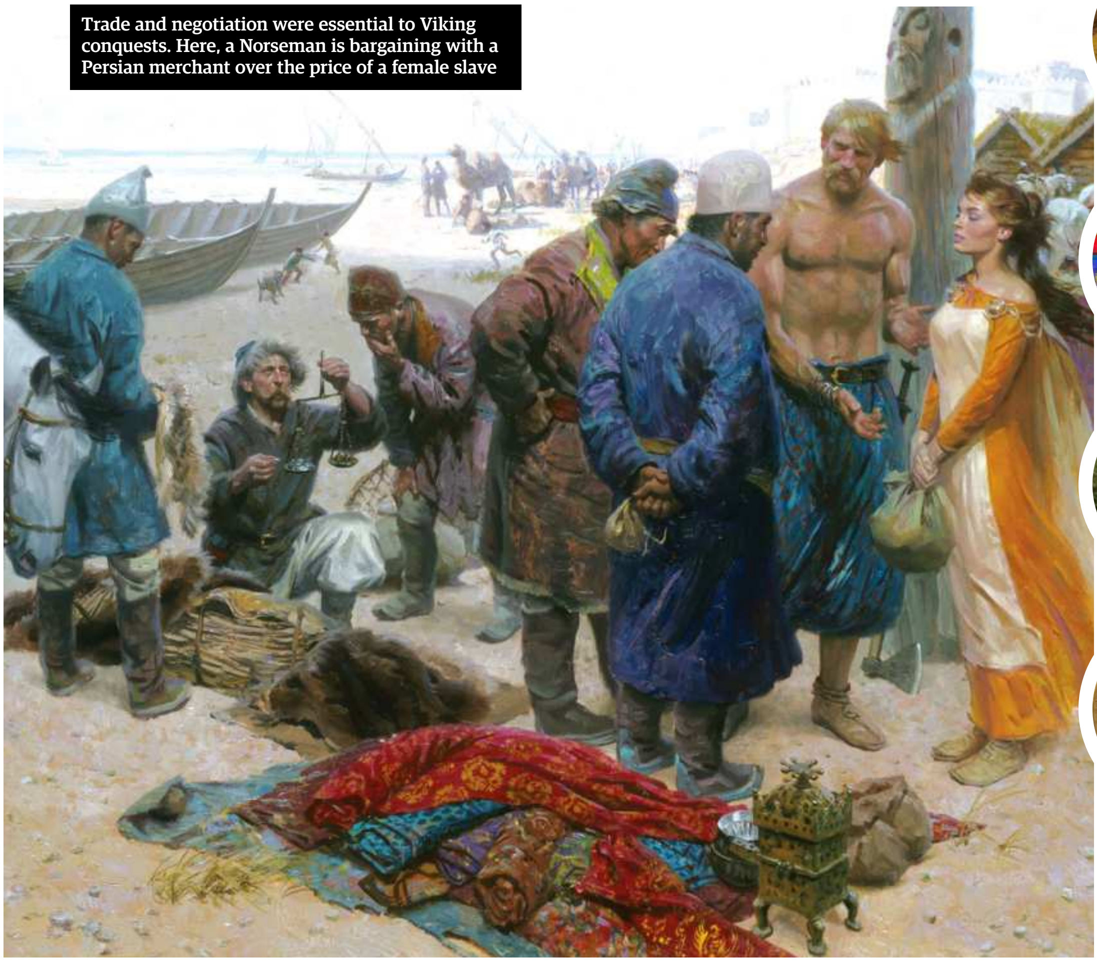
Using the river systems of the Baltic to their advantage, the Vikings travelled east for further trade and conquest

One of the greatest Viking achievements is perhaps their foray deep into Eastern Europe. In the 9th century, the Slavic tribes in Russia and Eastern Europe were fast becoming exhausted by constant inter-tribal wars that were stretching their resources and affecting their commerce. Capitalising on the broken alliances, the Viking ships arrived from the Gulf of Finland in huge numbers. Using large rivers such as the Volga, Neva and Volkhov as waterways, the men from the north vastly expanded their territory.

The town of Novgorod on the banks of Lake Ilmen became one of the main strongholds for the Nordic invaders, who were known as the 'Rus'. The East European plain provided the Vikings with forest and grassland that was ideal for hunting, fishing and farming. The plentiful food supply helped trade routes expand further northwards towards Lake Ladoga and southwards down the River Dnieper. The Rus people traded with local Slavic tribes and travelled into modern-day Russia, helping give the nation its name in the process. The three Swedish kings who came from overseas were Rurik, Sineus and Truvor, who settled in Novgorod, Beloozerg and Izborsk. Rurik's son, Oleg of Novgorod, travelled 600 miles south to take control of Kiev in 882 and went on to pillage lands even further southwards, knocking on the door of the Byzantine Empire in the process.

Like many of the areas that the Vikings inhabited, their influence steadily declined and was replaced by local customs. This happened once again in Eastern Europe as the Russian identity began to become distinct from Norse. One of the kings of Kiev, Vladimir, took the decision to make Greek Orthodox the area's religion in 988, decreasing the impact and relevance of Viking paganism even further. The culture change of the Norse people to more Slavic customs resulted in the growth of a Russian dynasty that rivalled the Carolingian Empire in Western Europe. The founders of the Russian tsardom were descendants of the Rurik Dynasty, a Viking dynasty that became one of Europe's oldest royal houses.

Trade and negotiation were essential to Viking conquests. Here, a Norseman is bargaining with a Persian merchant over the price of a female slave

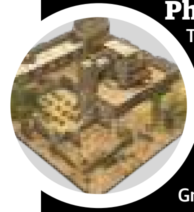


Seven other travelling civilisations

Normans

Well known for their lands in France and England, the Normans were descendants of the Vikings. A realm was established in Sicily and southern Italy in the 10th century and the Norman people also established states in North Africa and even as far east in what is now Lebanon.

Phoenicians



To the Mediterranean what the Vikings were to the north Atlantic, the Phoenicians were one of the finest trading civilisations of the ancient world. The most powerful city-states were Sidon and Tyre, which became almost too tough for Alexander the Great to conquer.

Venetian Republic

One of the finest nautical trading powers of all time, Venice was the greatest seaport in Late Medieval Europe. The Venetians were excellent shipbuilders thanks to the marshy lagoon in which they lived. The Republic controlled states such as Istria and Dalmatia until its decline and fall in the Napoleonic era.

Genoese Republic

Venice's rival in chief, Genoa benefited from a natural harbour that led to the Ligurian Sea. Its booming maritime economy allowed it to be an independent republic for 800 years. Genoa's trade helped the West in the Crusades and had links as far away as Crimea before losing ground to Venice.

Kalmar Union

In many ways the successor to the Vikings in Scandinavia, the people of the Kalmar Union were great travellers. The kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden were incorporated under one crown with Copenhagen as the capital. The Union also incorporated Iceland and Greenland.

Srivijaya

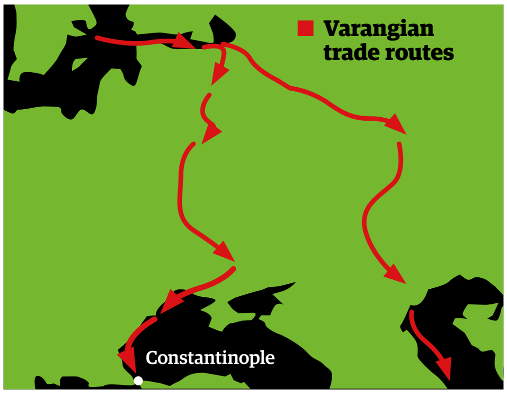
Another civilisation that based its power on sea trade, the Srivijaya Empire prospered between the 7th and 13th centuries. In its heyday, the civilisation had trade links with India, China and the Malay Archipelago. Their power waned after attacks by the Chola and Malayu people.

Abbāsid Caliphate

After overthrowing the Umayyad Caliphate in 750, the Abbāsid Dynasty became the strongest empire in Asia Minor and northern Africa until the Mongols in 1258. The caliphate presided over the 'Golden Age of Islam' as Muslim merchants traded in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

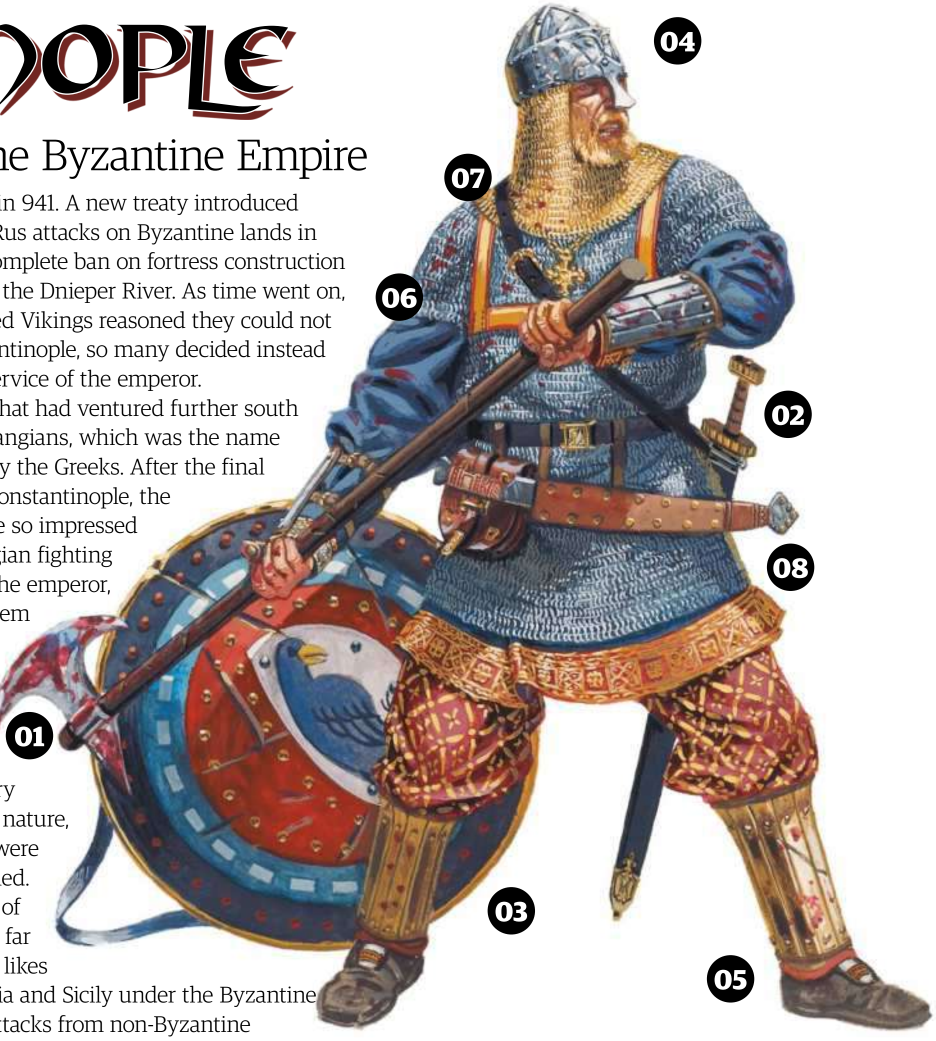
Constantinople

The Vikings venture to the gates of the Byzantine Empire



Viking lands were growing ever southwards, and by the early 10th century, an encounter with the Byzantine Empire was imminent. The movement came to a head in 860 during the siege of Constantinople, as a flotilla of 200 Viking warships emerged from the darkness and headed for the city they knew as 'Miklagard' (the Great City). After this, accounts become quite hazy, but the most likely outcome is the Vikings could only conquer the suburbs and not the fortified inner city without siege equipment. Determined to plunder the wealth of what was the biggest city the Vikings had ever seen, assaults continued, eventually resulting in the 2 September 911 commercial trading treaty. This brought friendly relations between the two states and frequent trade across the Black Sea as the Vikings took control of the Volga Trade Route from the Baltic Sea to the north and the Caspian Sea to the south. By 944, the relations soured, and Oleg's successor, Igor of Kiev, led an unsuccessful campaign against the Byzantines in 941. A new treaty introduced restrictions on Rus attacks on Byzantine lands in Crimea and a complete ban on fortress construction at the mouth of the Dnieper River. As time went on, the overstretched Vikings reasoned they could not conquer Constantinople, so many decided instead to go into the service of the emperor.

The Vikings that had ventured further south were called Varangians, which was the name given to them by the Greeks. After the final failed siege of Constantinople, the Byzantines were so impressed with the Varangian fighting mentality that the emperor, Basil II, hired them as warriors as part of his personal guard in 988. The Byzantine military was very multicultural in nature, so Viking men were warmly welcomed. This new breed of soldier travelled far and wide to the likes of Syria, Armenia and Sicily under the Byzantine banner as the attacks from non-Byzantine Varangians ended in 1043 after the Rus-Byzantine War. The loss signalled the end of the Varangian advance towards Asia as the area became either Slavic or Byzantine, not Norse. The Varangian Guard soldiered on until the 14th century, though, ensuring that there were still some Vikings standing in Constantinople.



Anatomy of a Varangian guard

The fearsome warriors who became the most brutal bodyguards of the age

01 Axe

Wielding a foot-long bladed axe, when the Varangian guards arrived, the Byzantine emperor's presence on the battlefield was confirmed.

02 Weaponry

Double-edged swords and spears would also be used if an axe wasn't available, or it was favourable for the conditions of battle.

03 Shield

Shields would be in the classic Viking round style and would be worn on the back when warriors were wielding a two-handed weapon.

04 Helmet

Varangian guards wore an iron conical helmet but were also happy to don a headdress instead in the hot Mediterranean weather.

05 Boots

Tough leather boots were covered by greaves or leg guards to protect the lower legs from hacks and slashes.

06 Clothing

A standard tunic would be worn under the armour along with metal strips that protected the wrists and forearms from slashes.

07 Armour

This elite unit had a choice of lamellar armour made out of iron or bronze plates or a chain mail hauberk.

08 Mounted infantry berserkers

The Varangian guard rode to battle but did their fighting on foot. Their heavy armour had pros and cons depending on the battle.

Constantinople had 12 miles of walls so even the Vikings had almost no hope of sieging it

The Christian Reconquista was well under way by the time the Vikings began their raids

IBERIA

The Norse expansion into the Christian north and Islamic south of Spain

After controlling the Bay of Biscay and establishing themselves on France's western coast, the Vikings moved even further south to the Iberian Peninsula. The first known attack was made up of 100 ships launched from Aquitaine in 844 and raided both Gijon and Coruna. After meeting strong resistance, the seafarers changed tack and headed for what is now Portugal. The raids were initially small and infrequent and, as with most Nordic attacks of the age, the coast was the worst affected. Prisoners were taken and monasteries were destroyed.

The first few assaults were mostly concentrated in the north of the Christian kingdoms of Asturias and Galicia. The southern Islamic part of Spain, al-Andalus, was targeted as well. Seville became a Viking city for six weeks in 844 and Lisbon was plundered for all its worth. The attacks came at a bad time for the Muslim population, who were enduring the start of the Christian Reconquista. Despite the ability for longships to sail from Normandy in less than a week and evidence of longphorts, Iberia would soon become a bridge too far for the Norsemen.

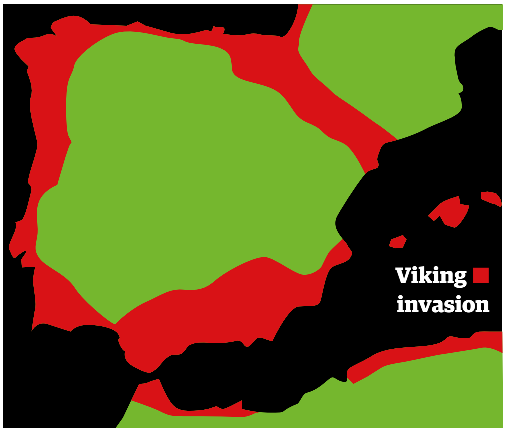
As the attacks subsided, the lands were regained from the Vikings. The Muslim leader, Abd al-Rahman II, took back Seville and sent the heads of 200 Viking warriors to his Moroccan allies. The Vikings returned in 859 led by Bjorn Ironside and Hastein. They sailed around the peninsula in search of southern France and Italy. This turned out to be a shrewd move as both the Muslim and Christian settlements were too strong for long-term attacks to be worthwhile and repelled the Vikings before they could get close to Seville this time. The Norsemen returned north to France but their descendants, the Christianised Normans, would be back in the Mediterranean in later centuries.

Legacy

The remnants of Viking expansion in Europe, Asia and the Americas

The influence left by the Vikings is greater than many are led to believe. From the Normans in the west to the Rus in the east, many civilisations that went on to dominate the late Middle Ages and beyond owe their roots to Viking expansion. The Vikings helped open the doors to pan-European trade and established urban centres at Dublin, Kiev and Reykjavik, cities at almost opposite ends of Europe. The effect of Norse culture is restricted more than it could have been as the Vikings never truly settled south of Denmark. They were an exploring people who lacked mass land armies and huge cities to stamp their authority and leadership on areas outside their own sphere of influence. They simply did not have the construction nous to establish a citadel as large or as powerful as Constantinople or Rome. Additionally, the Christianisation of Europe watered down the Nordic influence further and ended it completely when Scandinavia was fully converted in the 12th century.

Outside of Europe, Africa and Asia Minor were only briefly settled upon, so the influence seen today is from the Mongol Empire and Islamic caliphates. America suffers from the same problem, and that is why Columbus is and always will be seen as the first to discover the New World. The Viking age lasted for hundreds of years, and whether it's a city name in northern England, a type of axe or French surnames, the legacy is there for all to see.



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WHAT IS A VIKING SAGA?

From voyages to battles, gods to monsters, heroics to cowardice, the Viking sagas have explored all themes in magnificent detail

Written by Joanna Elphick

On spotting the word 'saga' in a title, the reader can be forgiven for having certain expectations about what is to follow. Such a story should be of epic proportions, span many lands, deal with the gamut of human emotions and positively groan under the weight of heroes and villains held within its pages. The Viking sagas offer us nothing less - and often, so much more.

The word 'saga' originates from Old Norse, meaning 'what is said' and this clearly reflects the tradition of the early skalds orally transmitting their stories to an enrapt audience during the cold winter months. The Viking people who dominated northern Europe from the late 8th century were mostly illiterate. Sharing tales was therefore an oral, communal pastime. Professional skalds were paid to entertain at large gatherings, often accompanying a musical interlude and a grand feast. Travelling storytellers would be welcomed into a community to bring the latest news and gossip from further afield. Individual skalds would often align themselves to a particular king, earl or chieftain, spreading details of their master's latest brave exploits. Meanwhile, intimate stories of family histories were told and retold around the firelight at home since a sense of ancestral lineage was highly regarded among the Viking people.

Society was made up of slaves, paid labourers, freehold farmers, nobles and their rulers. While Greenland and Iceland were democratic republics, the majority of Viking nations were warrior kingdoms, and, although the political, power-based landscape was highly misogynistic, women did maintain a certain level of influence, owning property and even holding land rights. Such detailed knowledge of their lifestyles and social norms is entirely down to the stories that have lingered in their minds, and were eventually captured on vellum over the centuries.

The Vikings were a collective group on the move. Originally from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, the migrant people, plunderers, warring armies and canny merchants carried their own culture across the world, leaving their distinctive mark, but also soaked up the customs, religious beliefs and ways of those they came across. This rich, multicultural tapestry is ever-present in the words of the sagas and influences from their travels are abundant. This is particularly true of early Scandinavian literature. An impressive knowledge of the natural geography of northern and western Europe is clearly the result of the itinerant Norsemen. The stories tell us that they discovered Iceland when their own ships were blown off course at around 860 CE. The following year, they were charging across Ireland, Britain, Spain, France and as far as North Africa and Arabia. They were the first seafarers to make it from the Old World to the American continent. Columbus merely walked in their considerable footprints.

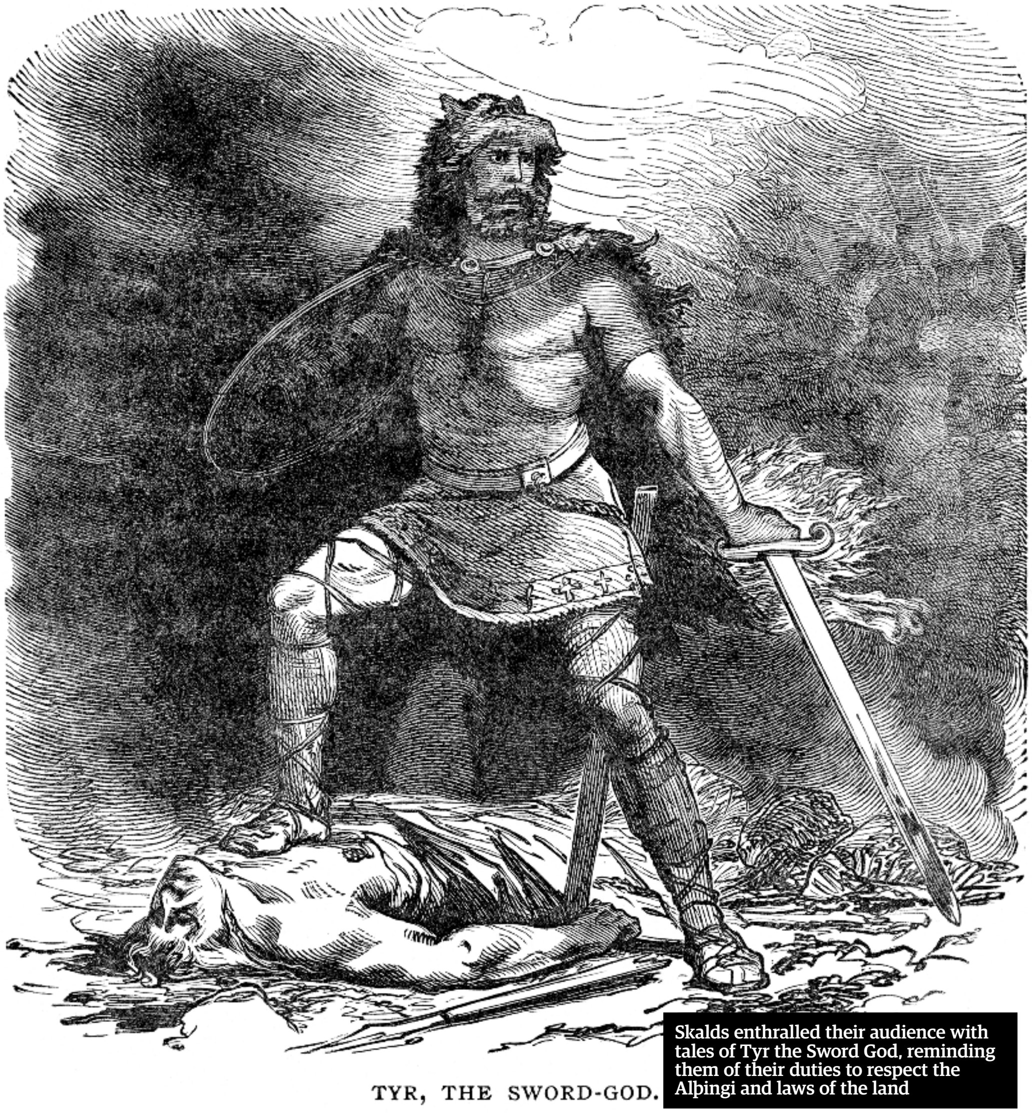
And so, for centuries, the Viking sagas were spread word of mouth from man to man, adult to child, via the skalds of the day, incorporating the latest battles, new ideas and information from far-flung locations. Men and women were kept abreast of the latest situations while children were subtly taught the importance of bravery and loyalty to their king and kinsfolk. However, as time progressed, the original tales were overshadowed by newer stories. People wanted to be up to date with the latest news and to hear of strange, foreign lands that had been discovered. Older skalds passed away, leaving younger storytellers to take their place and, as a

The Viking storytellers

The skalds are often described as being the great entertainers of Viking society but, in fact, they were far more important to their community. Initially, stories and poems were recited by the professional storytellers, passed down from generation to generation and retold from memory alone. Nothing was written down. However, as the Vikings transitioned from pagan beliefs to Christian, writing became more common, and by the 11th century, educated Icelandic people began to record their wondrous tales.

The storytellers had many important roles within the group, pleasing the crowds at gatherings, but also passing on vital lessons to the children. Moral dilemmas, historical facts and geographical knowledge were all woven into the stories, igniting a love of literature, mythology and history. The skalds were there to encourage good behaviour, initiative and honour by regaling their audience with tales of the gods and great Viking heroes. Bravery was to be instilled in the young at every opportunity. So it was that during the long, dark Scandinavian winters the skalds both entertained and educated the people. Although applauded for their oratory skills, the skalds were also feared by many, since a sarcastic poem could harm reputations. They were often close to the king or local chieftain, advising him and keeping him abreast of social views. In this way, their power was far-reaching. Kings tended to treat their skalds well since it was the storyteller who would ensure their legacy lived on. Some went on to record the laws as they were passed, while others worked alongside the church, recording the miracles of the saints for posterity and spreading the word of Christianity. Gradually, the pagan beliefs were overshadowed by the skalds' stories of Christian values and, to this end, they altered the Viking culture forever.

Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), an Icelandic poet, historican and politician


TYR, THE SWORD-GOD.

Skalds enthralled their audience with tales of Tyr the Sword God, reminding them of their duties to respect the Alþingi and laws of the land

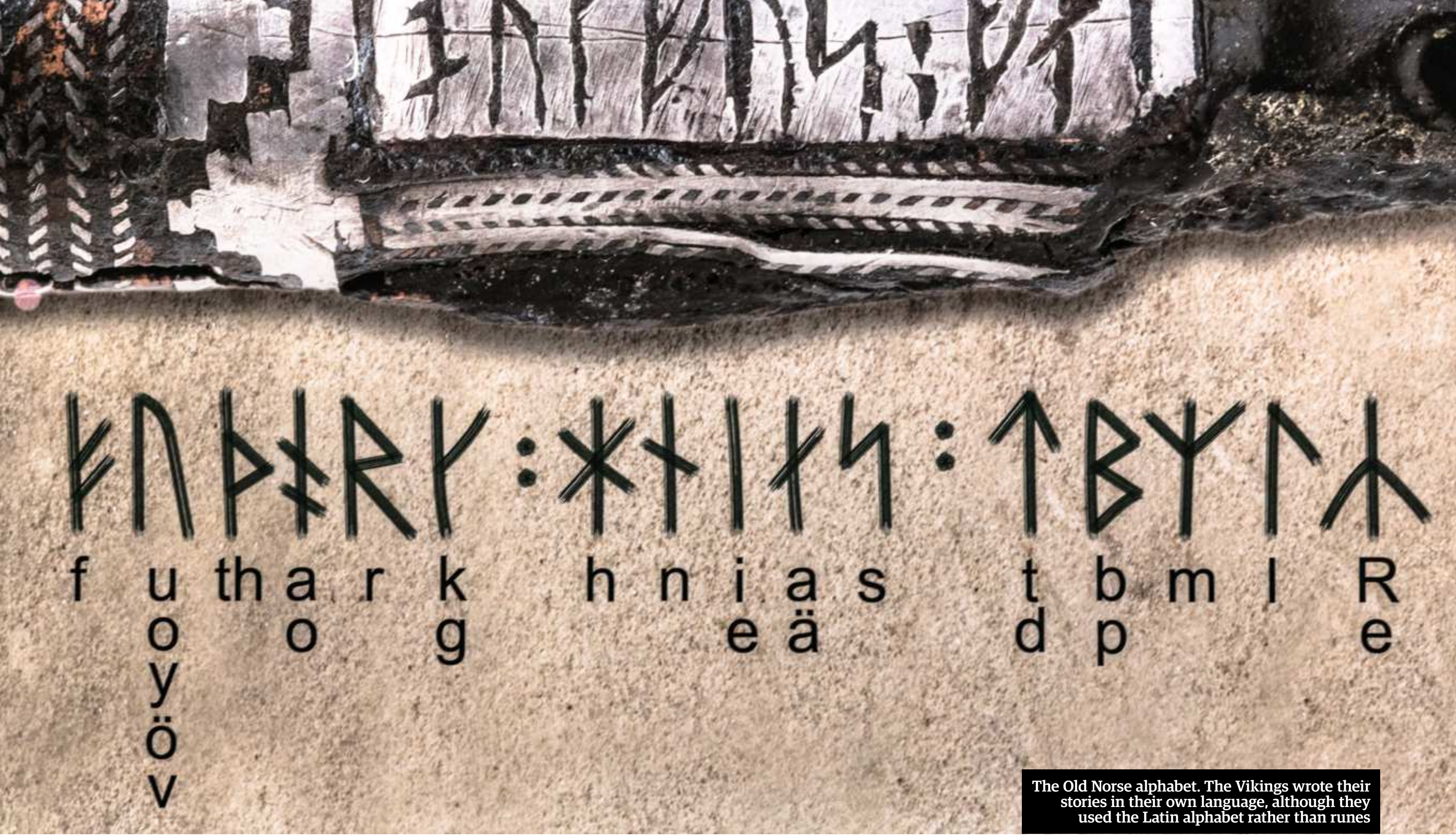
result, for the first time there was a genuine chance that these wondrous sagas might be lost forever. Ironically, it was yet another influence from overseas that would save them from extinction.

In 1000 CE, Iceland gradually shifted away from paganism, rejecting many of its beliefs and customs in favour of Christianity. Missionaries, coming from western Europe, taught the Icelanders to write. Until this point, runes were used for short notes only. Elsewhere across Europe, the educated were learning to write in ancient Latin, as was the custom in medieval times, reproducing Christian ideals and the laws of the day, but here, in the heart of the Viking people, the Norsemen chose to write in the language of Iceland. No longer would the skalds have to hold the entire Viking culture in their heads.

Throughout the 11th century, the educated Icelandic men began recording their mythologies, histories, poems and stories, and continued to do so up until the end of the 15th century and beyond. Iceland was unique among other European countries at that time since its population consisted of many freeholding farmers. These people, who were financially secure, had the means to commission books and manuscripts in their own language.

The Viking sagas can be loosely compared to the epic tale and, to a lesser degree, the modern literary form of the novel. Epics, by definition, deal with grand heroic themes, as do many sagas, but not all. Some sagas spend considerable time recognising the minor feats of lesser mortals, unseen in epic poems. They are highly distinctive in that they tell of mighty deeds, not necessarily about heroes, but about the common, plain Icelander. Both the novel and the saga narrate a chronological tale but, unlike the typical novel, the saga will often intertwine many narratives together. If a novel does take on multiple storylines, the author will usually attempt to bring them together by the close of the book. This is not the case within the saga, where a storyline may well simply peter out if no longer needed. Such a confusing disappearance of a character is sometimes dealt with by the creator by explaining that a particular character is now 'out of the saga'. A Norse author explained the style by comparing it to running water, which flows from many sources, yet all comes together to flow into a single place, the sea.

The novel spends time building characters and allowing the reader to glimpse his or her inner thoughts and motivations. The skalds gave little



The Old Norse alphabet. The Vikings wrote their stories in their own language, although they used the Latin alphabet rather than runes

time to such techniques. Rather than let us, the readers, see inside the head of a given character, we are shown through the characters' actions what his motives might be. A change of clothes, from light to dark hues for example, should warn the reader that the hero is angry and intends to carry out violent retribution. Other warnings of what is to come may present themselves in the guise of a dream or some other supernatural event. The narrator's voice is rarely, if ever, heard within a saga.

As the skalds proceeded to write down the sagas, different types began to emerge and have been preserved in these distinct groups to this day. One such sub-group, known as the Sagas of the Old Time, or '*Fornaldarsögur*', concentrate on the pre-Christian age in Scandinavia. These are the legendary sagas that joyfully mix ancient mythology with remote history. Here, the emphasis is on entertainment with little attempt at historical accuracy. The Christian skalds would have written such tales with their tongues firmly in their cheeks, but vital lessons were still to be gleaned from their telling. Children would have picked up on the notion of 'doing right' and they would have still inspired youngsters to be brave and heroic. Tales of pagan gods would have been warmly received since the Icelanders were proud of their heathen past but, unlike during the oral transmission of such sagas during olden days when the likes of Odin and Thor were treated with great respect and reverence, the Christian reader would have taken it as a lively narrative and nothing more. The Christian skalds had shifted the emphasis away from pagan factual events to entertaining parables. The best-known example of the Sagas of Antiquity, the *Völsunga saga*, consisted of stories taken from the heroic 'lays' or poems, and concern Sigurd, the Burgundians, and Jormunrekr, the Ostrogoth King.

> "This rich multicultural tapestry is ever-present in the words of the sagas"

The Sagas of the Kings, or *Heimskringla*, contain the historical biographies of the Kings of Norway from prehistoric times up into the 14th century. The very early sagas were written by the Norwegians, but it was the Icelanders who took on the role of capturing the narratives of the kings for posterity. Complicated passages of poetry were often embedded into the prose, known as 'praise poems', which were passed down by word of mouth during oral transmissions dating back over 200 years. These were the written forms of those skalds who had aligned themselves with a particular king so many years before. The sagas were almost certainly intended to be used as a historical reference, educating later generations and showing them who had gone before. These were given as gifts, sometimes to the kings themselves. It is thought that the magnificently illustrated *Flateyjarbók*, incorporating the sagas of Olaf I Tryggvason, who instigated the adoption of Christianity among the Icelanders, and St Olaf, was created as a present to the young King Olaf IV when he was a child. Other popular sagas within this genre included the bizarrely titled *Fagrskinna*, meaning fine skin, and *Morkinskinna*, meaning rotten skin.

Commoners and everyday folk were recorded in such tales as the *Bandamanna saga*, reinforcing a notable difference between the epic and the saga, while the sagas of the bishops and the saints bathed in the glory of the new Christian heroes. The lives of the apostles and saints were enormously popular and read with far more reverence and respect than that afforded to the now defunct pagan gods of Odin, Freyr, Baldr and Thor. Icelanders now looked to Heaven rather than Valhalla.

The Saga of Poets dealt with the tormented love lives of the famous skalds. Their tempestuous characters and roller-coaster careers made for entertaining reading since, to the ordinary citizen at least, they appeared to be exotic creatures with awe-inspiring capabilities and skills. Just as we might read of a movie star's life today, the Vikings wished to know more of their famous skalds.

Romantic sagas, also known as the Sagas of the Knights, were translated from continental love stories and instigated by the Norwegian King Haakon Haakonsson. Interest in such tales started in Norway but quickly spread to Iceland where they became quite popular, although there remained a lingering mistrust of such texts due to ancient Icelandic tradition. In the past, poems praising a woman had been banned. This was because of potential loss of reputation and unwanted publicity, but also the fear that the words might in fact be a spell and therefore contain a possible binding effect. The Vikings believed that poems were a divine gift from Odin, the highest of the gods, and therefore held special power. Although Christian intervention had generally washed away such heathen thought, pagan principles still lingered in the form of superstition and folklore. The earliest romantic saga was most likely the *Tristrams saga* in 1226 CE which was based on the legend of Tristan and Iseult. Further sagas followed, including the *Karlamagnús saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*. Eventually, the Icelanders moved beyond translating French romances and

The Swords in Rock monument on the outskirts of Stavanger, Norway, commemorates the Battle of Hafrsfjord. The skalds honoured such events in their sagas

attempted a number of their own, ultimately developing an indigenous romantic narrative.

The Contemporary Sagas, so-called because they were written shortly after the events they described, were different to the other sagas since they were not based on the oral transmissions of the early skalds but were instead recent history texts. The majority were set in 12th to 13th century Iceland and concerned Iceland's society during a particularly turbulent period where the country lost its political independence to Norway. Most of these tales are to be found in the *Sturlunga saga* and, to a lesser extent, *Arons saga*.

However, the most popular and most famous sagas of all are the Sagas of Icelanders, or 'family sagas'. These *Íslendingasögur*, as they are called in Icelandic, are the enthralling tales of the ancestors of Iceland living from the 9th to the 12th century. The stories speak of all walks of life, from the farmers to the local chieftains, and often follow their families for generation after generation. They therefore span the settlement era right up to the commonwealth period in Iceland's history. Clearly the time delay between the events and their composition has distorted the picture, particularly since many key moments have been given a Christian spin, but the family sagas are still a magnificent recollection of Viking society and Norse culture.

Early *Íslendingasögur* show the all-important Norse ideals of loyalty and heroism. Most are thought to have originated from the early oral transmissions shared by the local skald of each village. This ensured that the history of the families would remain in the hearts and heads of its people. When educated skalds, embracing Christianity and the written form, began scribing, it is thought that they took it upon themselves to commit all of these stories to vellum and therefore preserve them. Although most of the 'heroes' within the family sagas are basic farmers, some were famous at the time. The previously mentioned *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* of the the romantic sagas are also considered to be family sagas since they concerned local people. *Laxdæla saga* is a touching tragedy that is extremely unusual since it uncharacteristically appreciates the beauty surrounding the skald. The *Gísla saga*, written before the middle of the 13th century, shows enormous artistic skill and reflects the talents of its subject matter, the poet Gísli Súrsson.

As time progressed, the Sagas of Icelanders became more romantic in nature and added a magical element not seen since the Legendary Sagas. Folklore was carefully woven into the tales, mixing facts with the fantastic. The saga of Grettir the Strong, or *Grettis saga*, was riddled with fey figures and portrays the hero fighting against terrifying ghosts and monstrous trolls of Norwegian legend, a reappropriation of some of the old pagan motifs.

> "Here, in the heart of the Viking people, the Norsemen chose to write in the language of Iceland"

Without a doubt, the greatest of all the later *Íslendingasögur* is *Njáls saga*, written in 1280 CE but set in the 10th century against the background of Iceland's conversion to Christianity. Njál is a hero of his time; wise, thoughtful and prudent. He was also touched with the gift of prophecy which, once again, added the supernatural element missing from some of the early Christian tales. The author of this spectacular saga painted his hero with all the traditional Norse ideals of bravery, strength and unwavering loyalty, but he added modern, Christian attitudes to please readers of the day. When faced with death by burning, Njál resigns himself to his fate as any Christian martyr would, thereby unifying the old thinking of the traditional sagas with that of the new. The 'burnings in' was a common form of revenge in the Viking age and was recognised in the blood feuds. In this way, *Njáls saga* attempts to please the older generations who would appreciate the references to the past, and spark interest in the younger members of society who felt more at ease with Christian attributes. As a result, it is commonly held to be a carefully crafted literary masterpiece.

Conversion to Christianity from paganism played an important part in many Viking sagas. The most obvious is, of course, that without the introduction of writing the tales down, most, if not all, would never have survived. As it is, there are no original stories, told in oral transmission, left to enjoy. Rather, the modern reader must be content with the doctored versions, largely rejigged by Christian skalds. All the surviving manuscripts date from well after the time the stories were originally written down. There are a number of early and late manuscripts supposedly telling the same tale, but the differences are enormous. Just as fairy tales have been drastically altered in their retelling over the years, so too have the sagas. Understandably, the Christian slant became more prominent as time went on. The legendary gods, once looked upon for guidance, became nothing more than a good yarn to share with friends and family. Bravery and honour were slowly replaced with piety and virtue, but the desire to battle, to conquer lands and overcome family feuds was never lost. Although sometimes tempered, the passion of the Viking people remains fiercely alive throughout the stories.

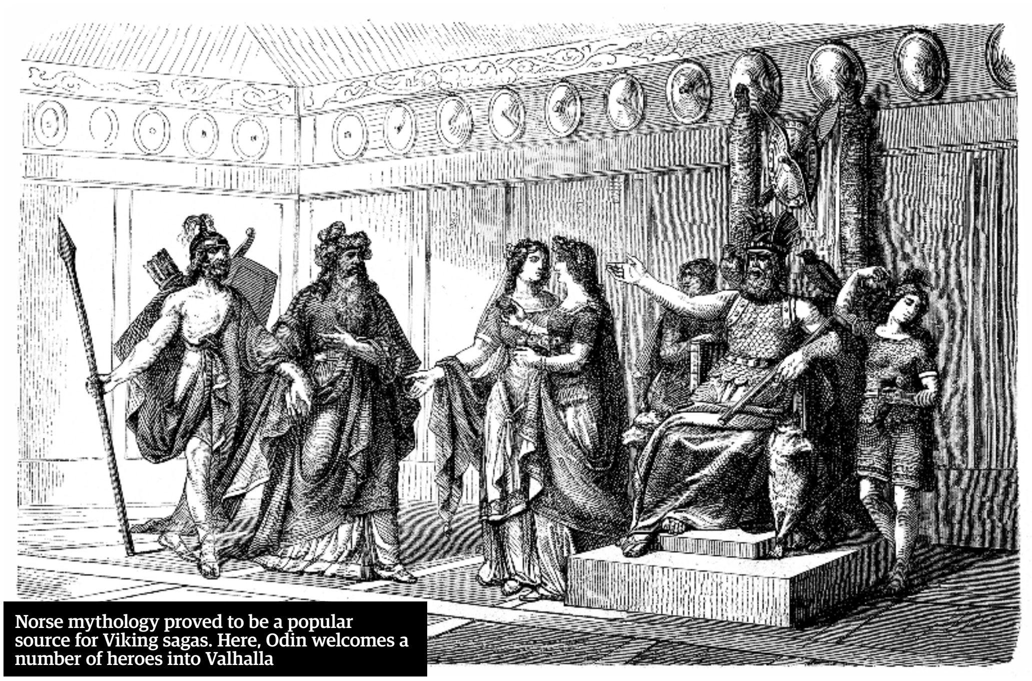
Kristni saga, an anonymous Icelandic text, assumed to have been written at some point during the 14th century, describes Iceland's conversion to Christianity. Interestingly, it discusses the process as a political one rather than a spiritual change of heart, which supports the many skalds' attempts to balance between the two religious factions. Pagan rituals, such as sacred oaths sworn over a ring and sacrifices to Thor, Freyr or Njord almost certainly continued in private, behind closed doors. Such ingrained, passionate beliefs could not be completely wiped out so easily, particularly if the reasoning behind the change was to align themselves with other nations.

Early historians accepted the sagas as accurate accounts – mythological creatures notwithstanding. It was generally presumed that the unfolding of historic battles, the founding of nations, the tumbling down of dynasties, were true, more or less. However, later academics resisted the notion that the sagas were historically accurate, and instead labelled them as nothing more than works of fiction that had been created to entertain the people.

Today, historians take a more balanced viewpoint. On the one hand, the sagas are highly romanticised. Heroes and heroines are always physically outstanding, intelligent and skilled, regardless of whether they're nobles or peasants. The likelihood of this truly being the case is remote to say the least. Supernatural events regularly occur but can be explained or understood through divine or magical intervention, pagan or Christian. Many of the Kings' sagas in particular concern highly impressive individuals or intensely wicked characters that, in reality, cannot be relied upon since they have been written in the style of brazen propaganda. A Christian gloss has equally muddied the waters. As with any historical text, the work is more often than not written from the winning side's viewpoint and, in the case of many of the sagas, written sometime after the event. But before we disregard these works entirely, we need to acknowledge their importance in understanding Viking life.

Through the sagas, historians have come to understand the complexity of Norse society, its rules on divorce, law and the influence of the Alþingi (local parliament), paganism, outlawry and their custom of fostering. The importance they gave to kinship, community and family honour have all been painted in colour for us to comprehend. This was not a warring tribal nation of barbarians, but rather a thoughtful, passionate set of peoples too easily stereotyped by Hollywood.

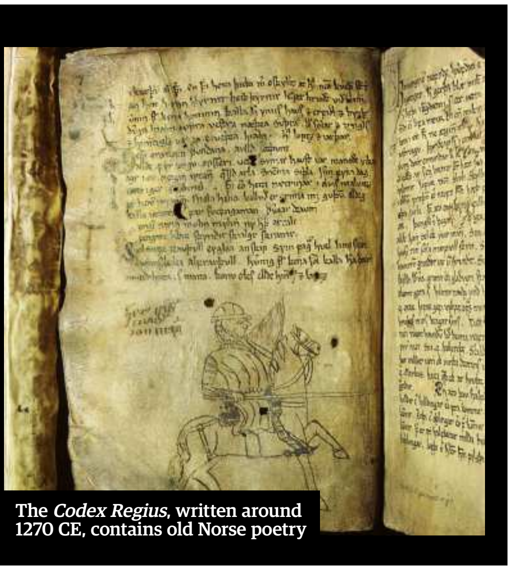
Archaeology is proving that many of these stories are steeped in fact, and they have even been used to locate genuine Viking settlements such as the L'Anse aux Meadows site in Newfoundland. The journeys undertaken by the Great Heathen Army and later groups can all be traced onto a modern map. These people were real, their lives were real and their stories have lived on, thanks to the Viking sagas.



Norse mythology proved to be a popular source for Viking sagas. Here, Odin welcomes a number of heroes into Valhalla

Oral court poetry of the skalds

Skaldic poetry may have originated in Norway but it was fully developed by the Icelandic poets between the 9th and the 13th century. Unlike Eddic poetry, the skalds named their work, focusing on description and adding subjectivity to the topics at hand. The metres were syllabic whilst the language itself was liberally sprinkled with poetic devices called 'heiti' (synonyms) and 'kennings' (metaphors). Such complex verse form was often composed as homage to a king or an admirable figure of the day and was almost certainly spoken rather than sung. The use of kennings, such as 'wave-horse' for ship, or 'sword-liquid' for blood, were often blended with motifs from Norse mythology, which would have been general knowledge at the time, but can cause great confusion today. While some are still clear – 'ring-giver' for king, for example – others, such as 'the blue land of Haki', meaning 'the sea' are lost on many new readers. Over 100 forms of skaldic poetry were used but by far the most popular verse form was the court metre or 'drottkvoett', which used syllable count, assonance, internal rhymes and alliteration. Eddic poetry, on the other hand, was nearly always anonymous. Unlike the subjective complexity of the skaldic verses, Eddic literature was simple and to the point. Three metres were used, comprising of the speech measure, the epic measure and the song measure, with no strict stanza rules. Whereas skaldic poets wrote of heroic deeds, epic battles, mythology and love, Eddic poets were inclined to write about anything, including bawdy or humorous topics. Their tone was often scathing and, sometimes, deeply insulting – and since the authorship was unknown, the author had no fear of reprisals. The most famous Icelandic medieval manuscript of poetic edda is known as the *Codex Regius* and comprises of a vast number of anonymous Old Norse poems. Subject matter includes many verses on mythology and Germanic heroic legends alongside the witty, and rather saucy, shorter pieces.



The *Codex Regius*, written around 1270 CE, contains old Norse poetry

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> “Snorri's delight in linguistic trickery, wordplay and symbolism pervades every part of his work”

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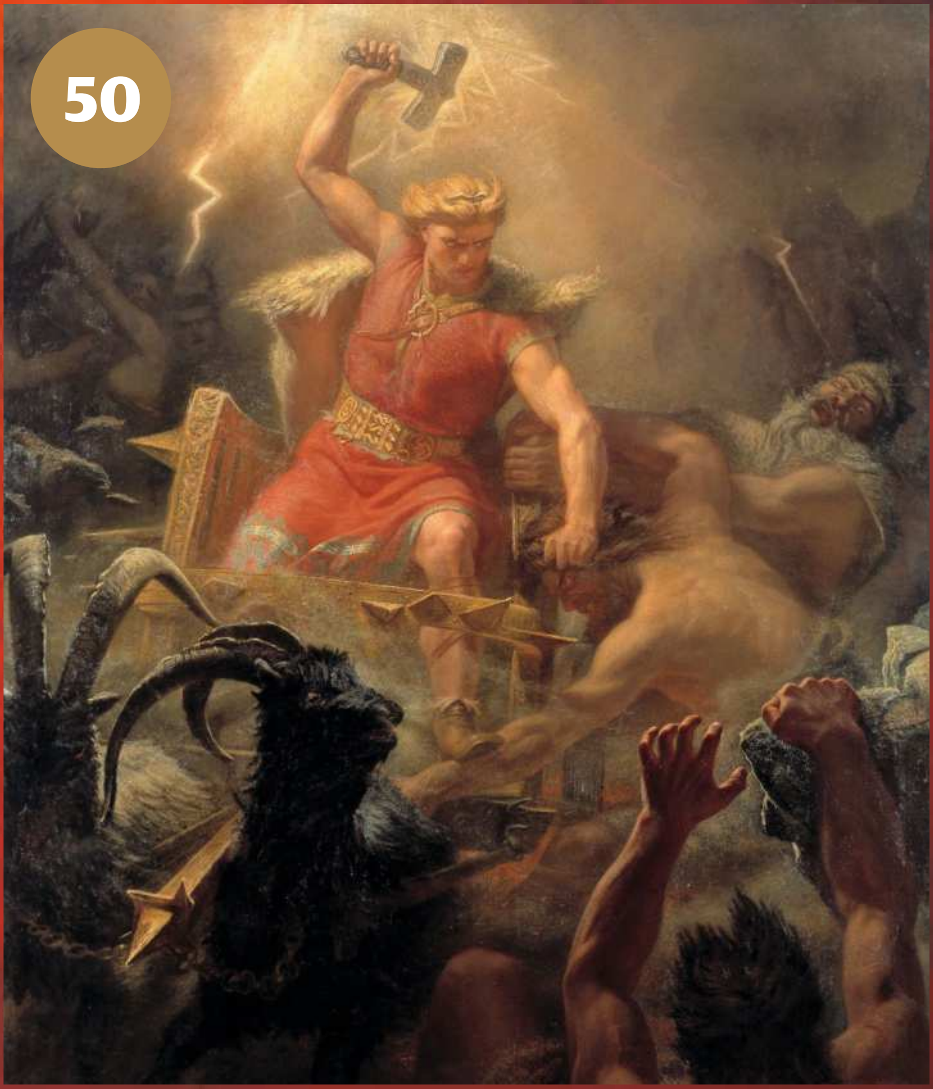
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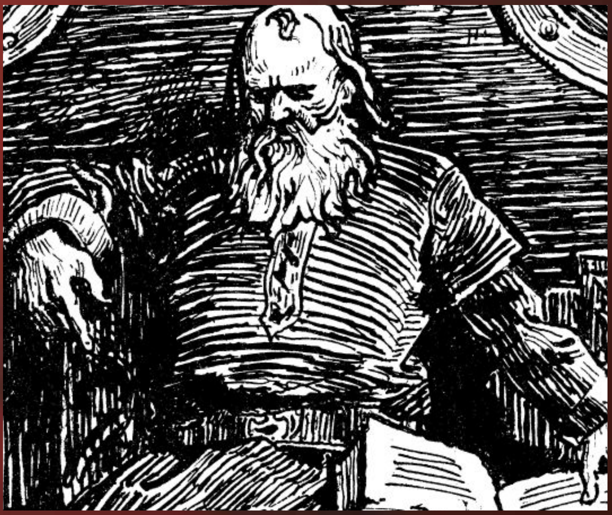
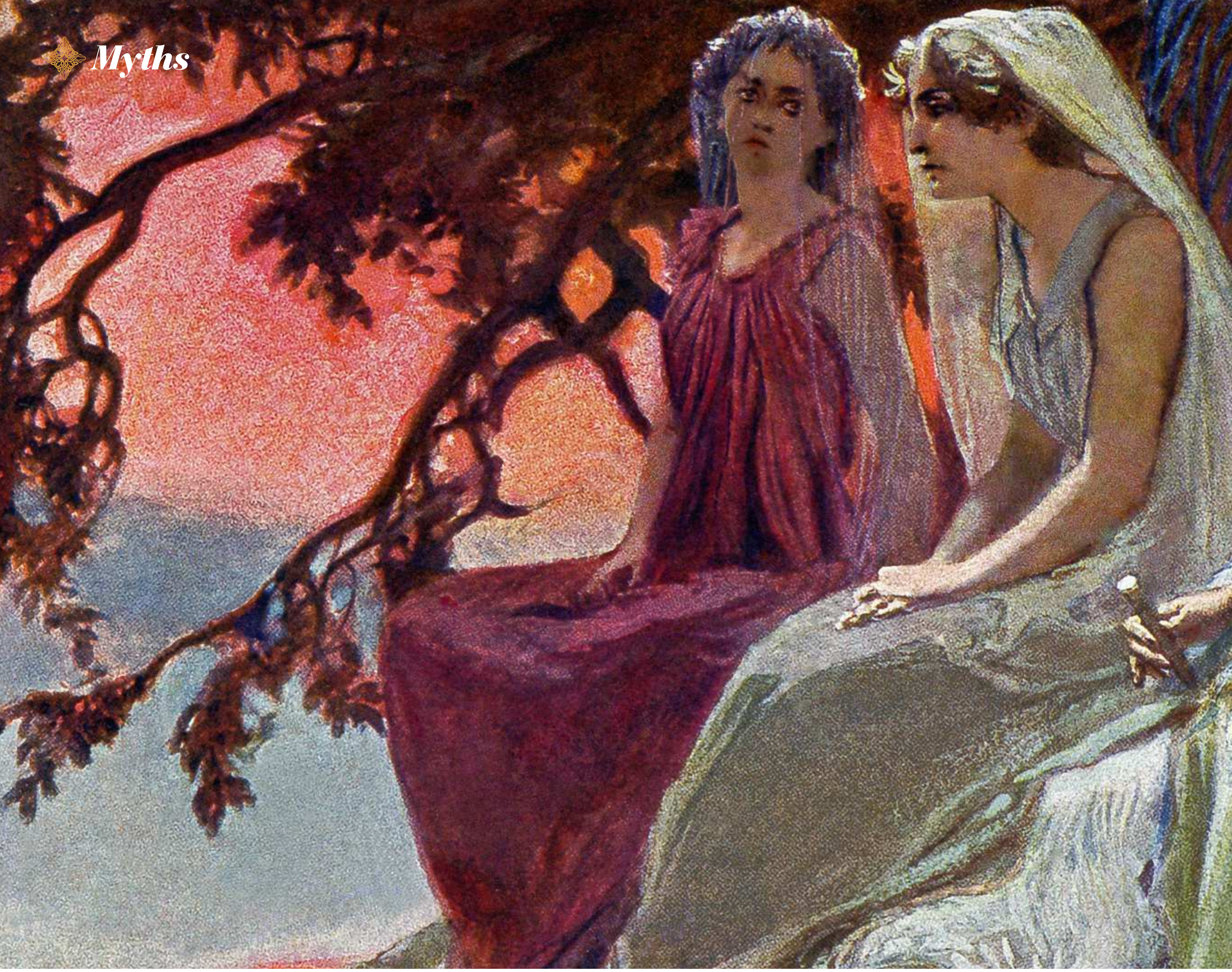




VIKING MYTHS

Before they became Christian, the Vikings had a rich polytheistic folk faith that featured a collection of gods

Most myths and religious stories tell their peoples' tale of the world's creation, but unusually, the early Viking myths also tell of its destruction. Before Christianity swept through the Scandinavian lands - a process that started in the 8th century - Norway, Sweden and Iceland had their own homegrown pantheon of gods, some of whom we still know from comics, films and TV. In fact, you may be familiar with the central idea of Norse cosmology - the 'world-tree', Yggdrasil - thanks to a diagram drawn by the titular hero of Marvel's *Thor*.

Yggdrasil, a mighty ash tree gnawed by the wyrm Níðhöggr at its roots and crowned by an unnamed eagle, plays host to four deer (Dáinn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr and Duraþrór) that feast on its boughs, and a squirrel named Ratatoskr, who travels up and down, sowing discord between the eagle above and the serpent beneath. The 'Nine Realms' of Norse cosmology are connected by the roots and branches of the tree, and although they are not all specifically or consistently named in the ancient sources, today's consensus tends to agree that they are comprised of Midgard (Earth, home of humans), Álfheimr (home of the elves), Niðavellir or Svartálfaheimr (home of the dwarves or alternatively the 'dark Elves'), Jötunheimr (home of the jötnar, or giants), Vanaheim (home of the Vanir, a type of god), Niflheim (one of the primordial realms, that of ice and mist), Muspelheim (the other of the primordial realms, that of fire), Hel (the realm of the dead, ruled by a queen of the same name), and Asgard, the home of the most powerful gods. The tree is tended by the Norns, three female deities who decide the fate of both humans and gods.

The leader of the gods, the aesir, is Odin, sometimes known as the Allfather. This wise and crafty king could be represented as a hale and

"The Norns are three female deities who decide the fate of both humans and gods"

hearty warrior in late middle age, ruling over his hall in Asgard, or as a seemingly innocent, seemingly simple beggar with a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his brow while he wandered through Midgard, presumably to disguise the fact that he had just one eye – having plucked out the other in exchange for wisdom. This was by no means the most dramatic thing Odin had ever done in his endless quest for knowledge – he also hanged himself from Yggdrasil for nine days and nights in order to unlock the secrets of the runes, or writing.

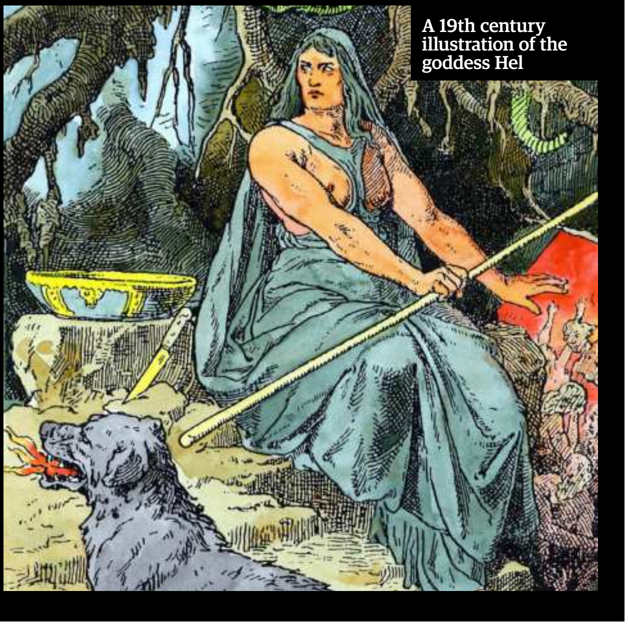
To us, the most famous of Odin's sons is Thor, a protective warrior god associated with oak trees and thunder. Yet while he was (and remains) the most popular god of the Norse pantheon, his half-brother Baldr was revered as 'the best'. Baldr was killed by the trickery of Loki, who is not an áss (a god) at all, but a jötunn, or elemental giant. And he is far from the only member of the pantheon who isn't a member of the aesir race – the goddess Skaði is of jötnar parentage too (as, in fact, is Odin), while Loki's daughter Hel, queen of the underworld, was born to the jötunn Angrboða. The twins Freyr and Freya and their father Njordr are vanir, another race of gods entirely. The Aesir-Vanir War is a myth that tells of the first ever war and its eventual resolution, which sees the two races become allies.

Most of the gods have several partners and children, some aesir, some vanir, some jötnar, with younger generations often displaying a combination of the powers possessed by their parents' races. Other less well-known members of the pantheon include Týr, the one-handed god of war, Iðunn, goddess of youth and her husband Bragi, god of poetry, Loki's horde of children (some monstrous, some not) and Ægir and Rán, the rulers of the sea. Their nine daughters, the waves, are collectively the mothers of Heimdallr, the foresighted god who watches for the beginning of Ragnarok.

Ragnarok, or 'the twilight of the gods', is the prophesied end of the world in Norse cosmology. It is a great battle in which the denizens of Muspelheim, led by their king Surtr and by Loki, war against the rest of the gods. Few of the major male names in Norse mythology are foretold to survive the conflict – only some of the children of Odin and of Thor, together with most of the goddesses (a notable exception is Sol, the sun goddess, who bears a daughter to follow in her footsteps shortly before her death), are predicted to escape the rains of fire and destruction and bring a new world into being, together with two humans, Líf and Lífþrasir, who will repopulate Midgard. Whether the cycle then begins anew, the stories do not tell us.

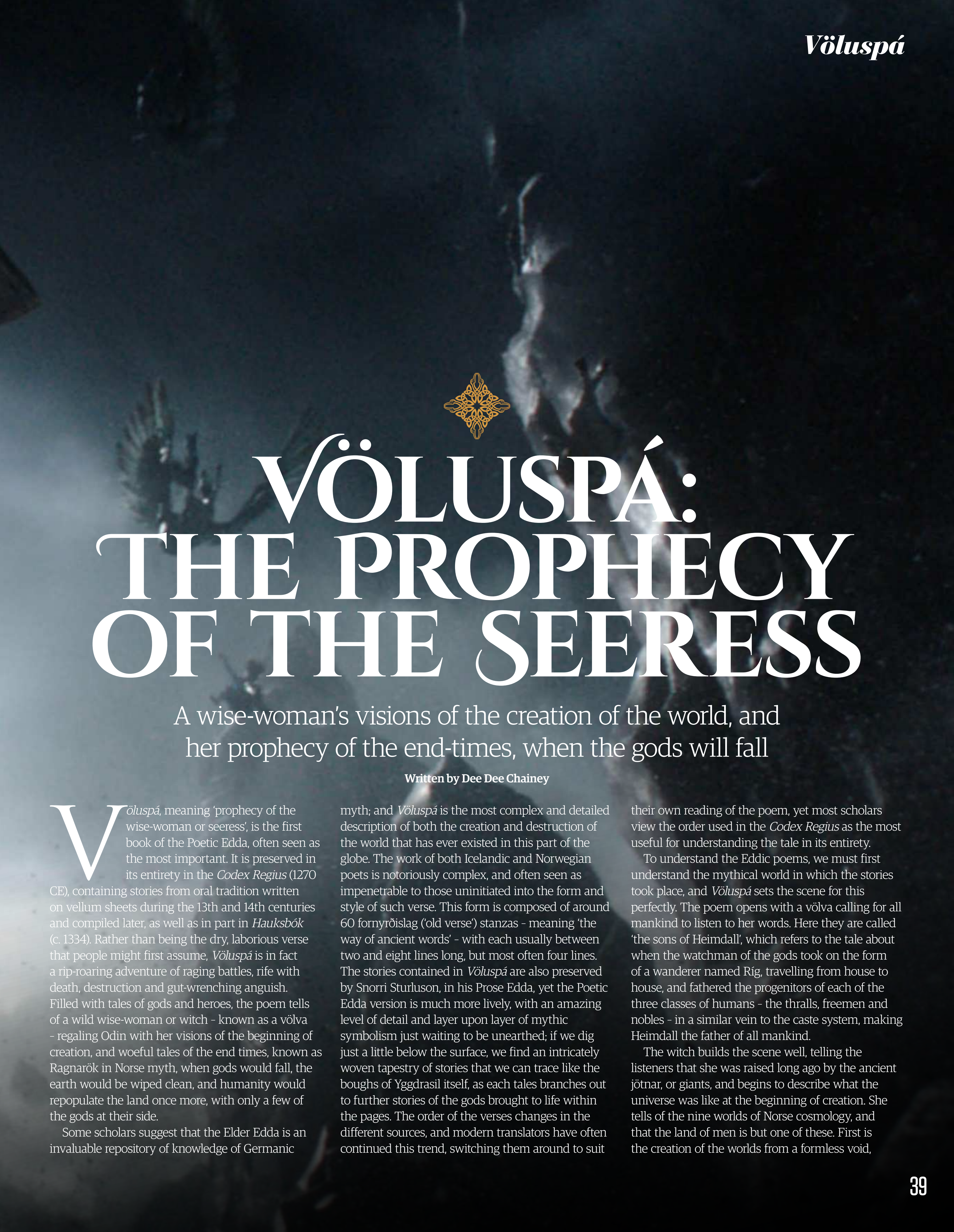
The afterlife in Norse mythology

During the Christianisation of Scandinavia, the new faith adopted the language of the old, with 'Hell' adapted from the Norse 'Hel'. Christians had previously referred to their theological place of punishment by the name of the Greek god of the Underworld, Hades, or 'Inferno', meaning fire. Yet the Norse Hel wasn't a plain of torment – far from it, according to some sources. Hel, ruled over by the goddess of the same name, was where those who had died of sickness, old age or accident went. It's often described as dreary, but some stories, especially those dealing with the death of Baldr, describe Hel decorating her hall and hosting a feast to welcome the best of Odin's sons. Warriors who died in battle, meanwhile, were shared equally by Odin and Freya; some going to the god's hall Valhalla, others to the goddess' meadow Fólkvangr, where they were feted and fed, and where they could enjoy daily battles followed by banquets for eternity.



A 19th century illustration of the goddess Hel

© Alamy



VÖLUSPÁ: THE PROPHECY OF THE SEERESS

A wise-woman's visions of the creation of the world, and her prophecy of the end-times, when the gods will fall

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

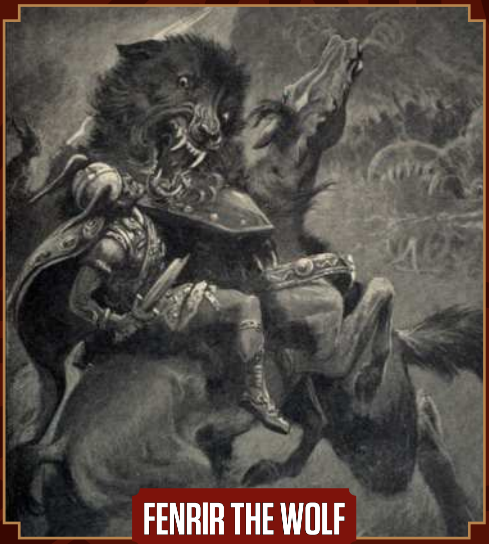
Völuspá, meaning 'prophecy of the wise-woman or seeress', is the first book of the Poetic Edda, often seen as the most important. It is preserved in its entirety in the *Codex Regius* (1270 CE), containing stories from oral tradition written on vellum sheets during the 13th and 14th centuries and compiled later, as well as in part in *Hauksbók* (c. 1334). Rather than being the dry, laborious verse that people might first assume, *Völuspá* is in fact a rip-roaring adventure of raging battles, rife with death, destruction and gut-wrenching anguish. Filled with tales of gods and heroes, the poem tells of a wild wise-woman or witch - known as a völva - regaling Odin with her visions of the beginning of creation, and woeful tales of the end times, known as Ragnarök in Norse myth, when gods would fall, the earth would be wiped clean, and humanity would repopulate the land once more, with only a few of the gods at their side.

Some scholars suggest that the Elder Edda is an invaluable repository of knowledge of Germanic myth; and *Völuspá* is the most complex and detailed description of both the creation and destruction of the world that has ever existed in this part of the globe. The work of both Icelandic and Norwegian poets is notoriously complex, and often seen as impenetrable to those uninitiated into the form and style of such verse. This form is composed of around 60 fornyrðislag ('old verse') stanzas - meaning 'the way of ancient words' - with each usually between two and eight lines long, but most often four lines. The stories contained in *Völuspá* are also preserved by Snorri Sturluson, in his Prose Edda, yet the Poetic Edda version is much more lively, with an amazing level of detail and layer upon layer of mythic symbolism just waiting to be unearthed; if we dig just a little below the surface, we find an intricately woven tapestry of stories that we can trace like the boughs of Yggdrasil itself, as each tales branches out to further stories of the gods brought to life within the pages. The order of the verses changes in the different sources, and modern translators have often continued this trend, switching them around to suit their own reading of the poem, yet most scholars view the order used in the *Codex Regius* as the most useful for understanding the tale in its entirety.

To understand the Eddic poems, we must first understand the mythical world in which the stories took place, and *Völuspá* sets the scene for this perfectly. The poem opens with a völva calling for all mankind to listen to her words. Here they are called 'the sons of Heimdall', which refers to the tale about when the watchman of the gods took on the form of a wanderer named Ríg, travelling from house to house, and fathered the progenitors of each of the three classes of humans - the thralls, freemen and nobles - in a similar vein to the caste system, making Heimdall the father of all mankind.

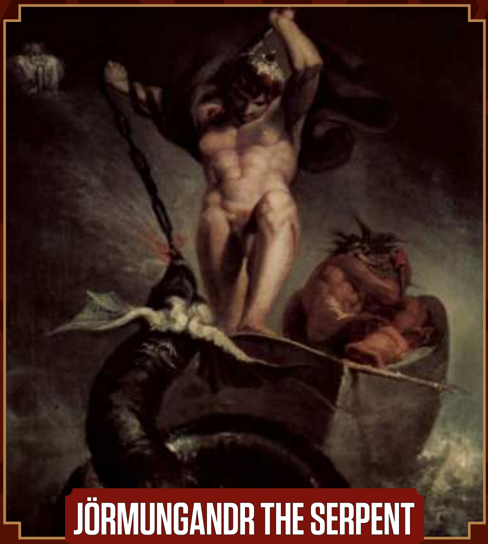
The witch builds the scene well, telling the listeners that she was raised long ago by the ancient jötnar, or giants, and begins to describe what the universe was like at the beginning of creation. She tells of the nine worlds of Norse cosmology, and that the land of men is but one of these. First is the creation of the worlds from a formless void,

THE CHILDREN OF LOKI AND THE GIANTESS ANGRBOÐA



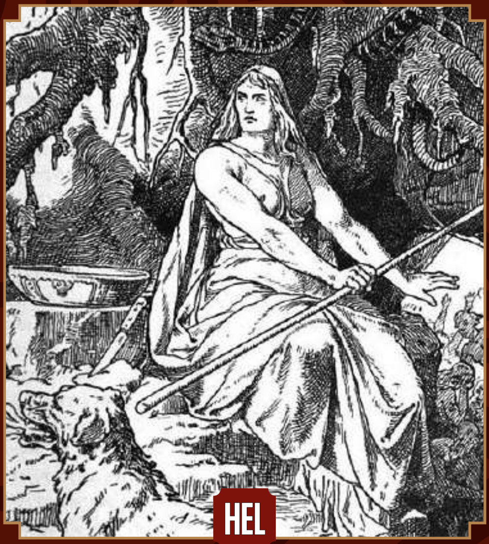
FENRIR THE WOLF

Fenrir is a monstrous wolf, a son of Loki raised by the gods who hoped to tame him, and minimise the chaos he might wreak in the world. He, along with his siblings, is later summoned by Odin, as it's foretold that they will cause disaster for the gods. Fenrir is fated to devour Odin at Ragnarök, and because of this prophecy he is bound with the chain Gleipnir, forged by the dwarfs from six things that don't exist: the sound of a cat's footfall, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird. During the binding, Fenrir bites off the hand of the god Tyr in revenge. The chain will hold him until the end of the world, when he will finally break free to fulfil his destiny and slay Odin. Fenrir is father of the wolf-children Skoll and Hati who steal the Sun and Moon at Ragnarök.



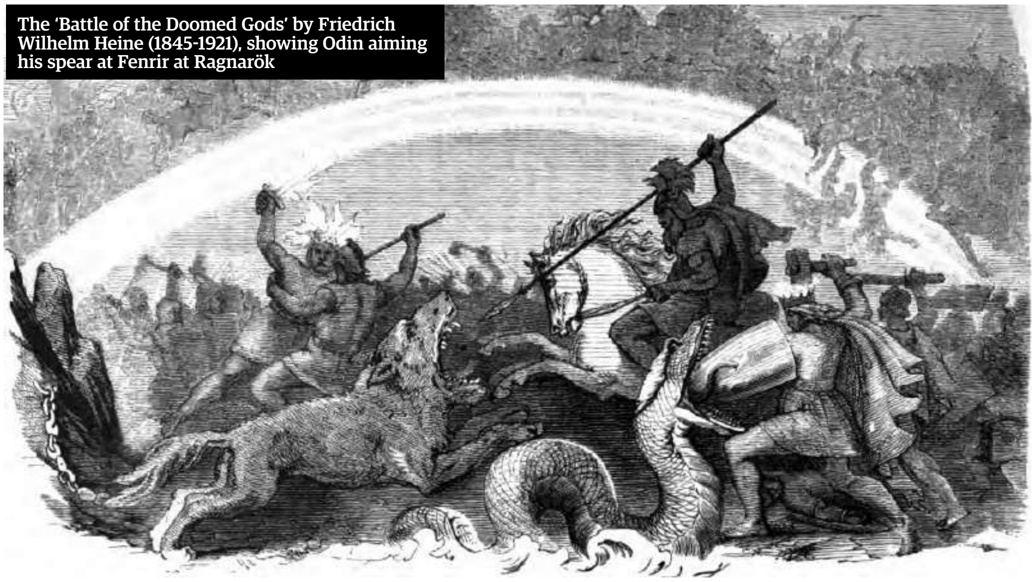
JÖRMUNGANDR THE SERPENT

Also known as both the World Serpent and Midgard Serpent, Jörmungandr is the gigantic serpent fated to kill his nemesis Thor at Ragnarök. Jörmungandr was thrown into the ocean that circles Midgard by Odin, and grew large enough to encircle the whole world and even grab his own tail in his maw. One myth tells how Thor pulled Jörmungandr out of the ocean, after baiting his line with a huge ox head on a fishing trip with Hymir, who cuts the line as Thor is reaching for his legendary hammer in order to kill the sea serpent. In another meeting, the giant Útgarða-Loki disguises Jörmungandr as a cat, and charges Thor with lifting it with his great strength. Thor manages to raise just one of the cat's paws from the ground - still, it was a great feat, considering he managed to lift the gigantic World Serpent at all.



HEL

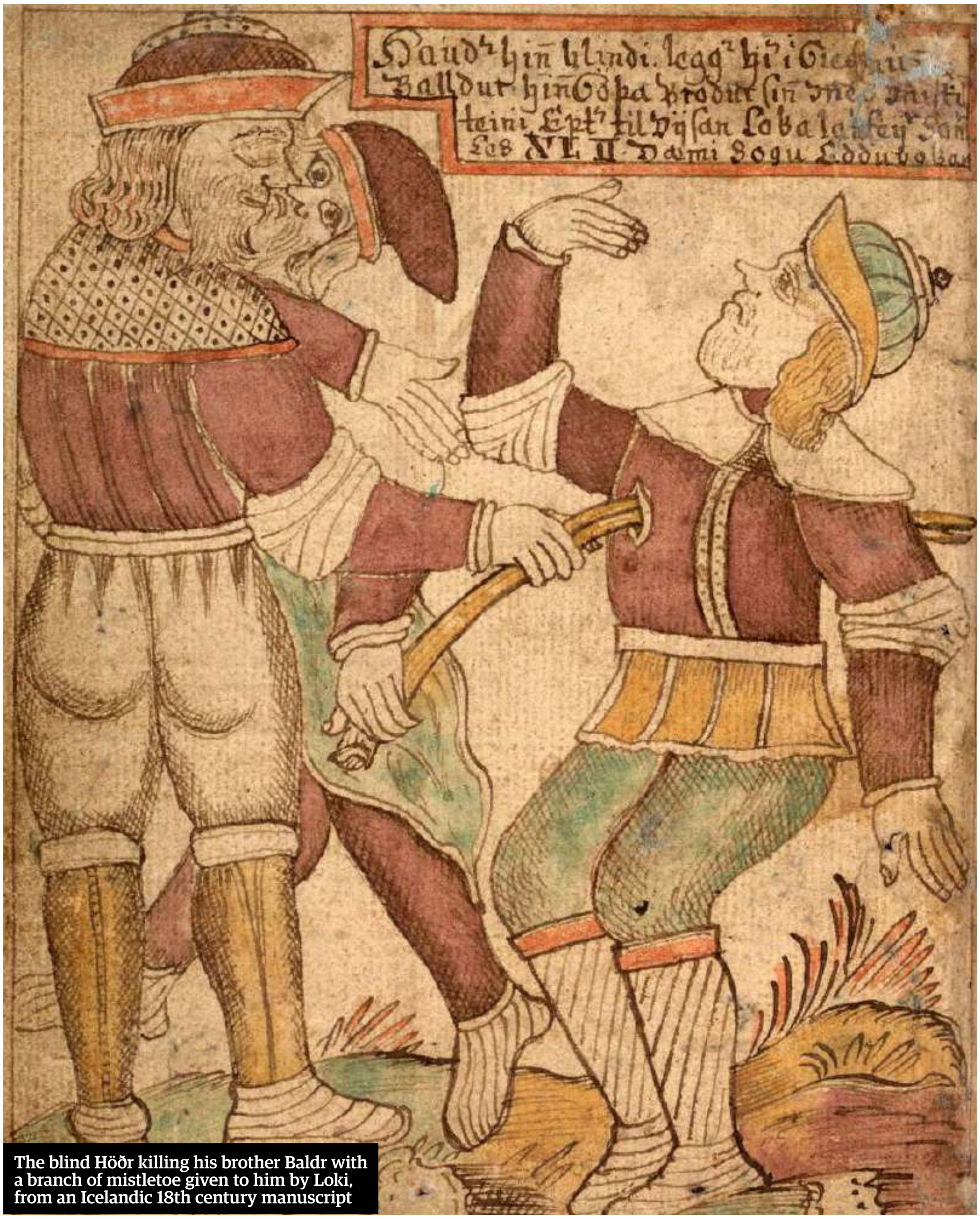
Often seen as the goddess of the underworld, here in *Völuspá* Loki's daughter is said to rule over the place of the same name. Hel is an underworld realm of the dead, where the wicked undergo torture, seen as a great mansion with many halls. In general, Hel is thought to have been appointed as ruler of the realm, and given control over the nine worlds, after being cast down to Niflheim by Odin. It is here that she receives a portion of the dead - those who die peacefully, of sickness or old-age - with heroes and those who die in battle instead going to Valhalla, the resplendent hall of Odin, while Freya welcomes others to Fólkvangr, 'the Field of the Warriors'. Often described as half-black or blue and half-flesh-coloured with a grim demeanour, Hel is called a 'troll-woman' or ogre, and is extremely fierce.



The 'Battle of the Doomed Gods' by Friedrich Wilhelm Heine (1845-1921), showing Odin aiming his spear at Fenrir at Ragnarök

which some have since called Ginnungagap. In the beginning there was no land nor sea. There was no heaven, and no earth, so certainly no grass upon it; and all that existed was chaos. In this chaos lived the ancient being Ymir, who some say was a giant. In this void, the sons of Bur - named Odin, Vili and Vé, the first of the Æsir gods - raised up the skies, created the earth and rocks, and when this was done the sun shone down and made the land green with grass and vegetation for the first time.

At this time, the skies and astral bodies too had to be organised. The Æsir held a holy council, and decided a place to put the Sun, the Moon and the stars. This is how they created the morning, midday, afternoon and night. From the waxing and waning of the Moon, and the rising and setting of the Sun, time itself gained meaning, and the years began to pass.



The blind Höðr killing his brother Baldr with a branch of mistletoe given to him by Loki, from an Icelandic 18th century manuscript

> "In this chaos lived the ancient being Ymir, who some say was a giant"

A time of plenty ensued, and the Æsir built up great temples and altars across the plane of Ithavoll, the meeting place of the gods. Here too they set up forges smithing ore, hammering out tongs and tools alike. Times were joyful: they spent their hours playing games at tables, gold was abundant, and they wanted for nothing.

Yet this gaiety was not to last. Soon three giantesses came from Jötunheimr, the land of the giants. Once more, the gods called an assembly meeting to decide what must be done. It was proclaimed that the race of dwarfs must be raised, from the blood and bones of the sea giant, Brimir – who some say is the very same Ymir, whose body was used by Odin, Vili and Vé to fashion the earth in the Prose Edda. So from the earth dwarfs were created in man's likeness, the first and greatest of these being Môtsognir, with a list of many more following him in what is known as the 'Catalogue of Dwarfs'. Many of the dwarf-names found here were used by JRR Tolkein in his books about the plight of the hobbits, and other creatures of Middle Earth, with the name 'Gandalf' being the most well-known of these, said to mean 'magic elf'. Other name meanings include 'mighty thief', 'wind elf' and 'oak shield'. The witch tells that the dwarfs came from the rocks and mountains, through the wetlands, up to the plains where they made their home in the sands.

The poem seems to shift here, when three of the Æsir come to the world from their assembly, and we are told of the creation of the first man and woman: Ask and Embla, meaning 'ash' and 'elm', who are without a destiny, and without all sense and spirit. (Strangely, while Snorri doesn't give us the names of the first humans in the Prose Edda, he does say that they are made out of trees, confirming the connection here in *Völuspá*.) We are also told that they do not yet have blood, cannot move, and are without colour. The two are devoid of life until the three gods come to them, and bestow gifts upon them: spirit from Odin, sense from Hoenir, and heat and goodly colour from Lothur, which some believe is an older name for Loki, the trickster figure of Norse myth who is often associated with fire and flame.

Here, the völva describes the mythical Yggdrasil, a gigantic evergreen ash tree that stands at the centre of the nine worlds. It is covered in shining white loam, and all the rains and dew that cover the valleys of earth flow from it, as it stands above the Well of Fate, Urðarbrunnr. This well is guarded by the three Norns themselves – Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld – the rulers of destiny who set down the laws of men, choose their lives, and dictate their fate, similar to the three Fates in other mythologies.

Next, the witch speaks directly to the god Odin, telling him that she knows all, including the lengths he is willing to go to in order to learn of his own destiny – indeed even the location of his eye. This reference conjures the tale of when he sacrificed his eye in return for a drink from the waters of Mímir's well. While this passage is shrouded in mystery here in *Völuspá*, the Prose Edda explains that the well's waters contain both wisdom and intelligence, and Mímir himself drinks from them each morning, the source of his own knowledge and wisdom. Because she too knows all, she remembers the first war in all the worlds, when the being Gullveig was speared by the gods, and then burned three times in the hall of Hárr – or Odin – only to be reborn three times also. After this burning she was named Heiðr – or Heidi – and was a great witch, all seeing and wise in the ways of magic, bewitching the minds of all who saw her magical feats, and able to tame even wolves; yet, it is added that she was a joy to all evil people who beheld her. The witch was said to have performed seiðr magic, which archaeologists believe to be of a shamanic nature, using trances and other sorcery to cast spells. Some have suggested that this witch is in fact the goddess Freyja, who was the first of the Vanir gods to come among the Æsir, and whose mistreatment led to the great Æsir-Vanir war, recounted next in *Völuspá*. Indeed, *Ynglinga saga* says that it was Freyja herself who introduced seiðr magic – a purely Vanir practice – to the Æsir gods.

The war began when Odin hurled his spear, and the wall that protected the Æsir gods was broken through by the warlike Vanir. Once more, an assembly was held, to decide whether the Æsir gods should pay a fine, or if both pantheons could be worshipped, side by side. The latter was decided upon, and both the Æsir and Vanir were to be worshipped in equal measure. Another story is alluded to here: a giant was tasked with rebuilding the demolished walls of Asgard, the home of the gods, after the Vanir broke them down. In return, he would be given the Sun and Moon, with Freyja as his wife. This promise was broken when the gods charged Loki with delaying the works so that they were not completed in the allotted time bargained, at which the giant threatened the gods. Thor rose up in anger and killed the giant, breaking their oath to him, which led to the two races becoming sworn enemies. Here, the audience would be familiar with the tales, and would think to the final battle, Ragnarök, in which the giants would form a faction of the gods' enemies. The völva underpins this by interjecting with more secret knowledge about the gods: this time that the horn of Heimdall, called Gjallarhorn, is hidden under the world tree. This is the horn that the watchman will use to warn the gods of the oncoming destruction at the end of the world, and call them to battle when the rainbow bridge is breached. In *Grímnismál* this is called Bifröst - it separates Asgard from the realm of men.

This is the point where the völva's words turn to the real reason for Odin's audience: her prophecy for the future, that of the fate of the gods. First she refers to the slaying of Baldr, the son of Odin, and the goddess Frigg, the shining one of the gods. While not recounted in detail here, the tale tells that Frigg, a worried mother, made all things on Earth swear an oath not to harm her son - all but mistletoe, deemed too weak to hurt him. After this, the gods often took to launching weapons at Baldr in sport. However, she says that in her visions mischievous Loki brought a mistletoe branch to Baldr's brother, Höðr, who happened to be blind. Höðr fatefully threw the branch at Baldr, and killed him. In retribution, Loki was tied to a rock using the entrails of his son, and a venomous serpent set above his head. His wife Sigyn stood faithfully by, catching the drips in a bowl, yet she had to go to empty it whenever it became full, and each time venom landed on Loki the Earth shook with his writhing. That shaking is said to be an explanation for earthquakes and tremors.

Following this, the gods will be overwhelmed by their enemies: the jötnar who reside on the banks of the icy River Slith, the dwarfs of the golden halls of the dark fells, and the dead who reside in the realms of Hel. The völva tells Odin of her vision of a great hall in Hel, the underworld realm of the dead, covered in slithering venomous serpents, or else with walls woven from their spines; in this place the worst of men wade in sluggish rivers, those who have broken oaths, perjurers, murders, and seducers. Here too lurks Níðhöggr, meaning 'malice striker', a serpent-like dragon who gnaws on the roots of the world-tree, and represents all the evil in the world; here he sucks on the blood from the corpses of the dead, while the wolf tears at men.

Now the seeress lists the signs that presage Ragnarök. First, the sun will grow dark. Great storms will sweep across the land, and three roosters will crow to give the signal that the battle is about to commence. Eggthér, the watchman of the giants, sits, cheerfully playing on his harp, when the first, the red cockerel Fjalar ('deceiver') crows from the forests of Jötunheimr to wake the giants for battle. Next to be heard will be the cries of Gullinkambi from Valhalla, the great hall, where the gods will awake to his call. And the third and last call will be from Hel's rust-red rooster, from the depths of the underworld. Next, Garmr, the hell-hound guardian of the gates of the underworld, will howl, break his chains and run amok. Heimdall will blow his Gjallarhorn calling the gods to their last battle, while Odin seeks wisdom from Mímir's severed head. Odin is said to carry this head with him as it gives him counsel, after he embalmed it and magically gave it power to speak. As the world tree bends and groans, the fire jötnar will come forth, and the World Serpent writhes, creating gigantic waves that roll across the seas. Having broken free from its mooring in the tumult, the giant Hrym will set sail from the east in his ship Naglfar - made from the finger and toenails of the dead. Aboard this vessel is the jötnar army, preparing to battle the gods in the final showdown of the world's end. From the north, Loki stands at the helm of a ship carrying the dead of Hel.

> "As the world tree bends and groans, the fire jötnar will come forth"

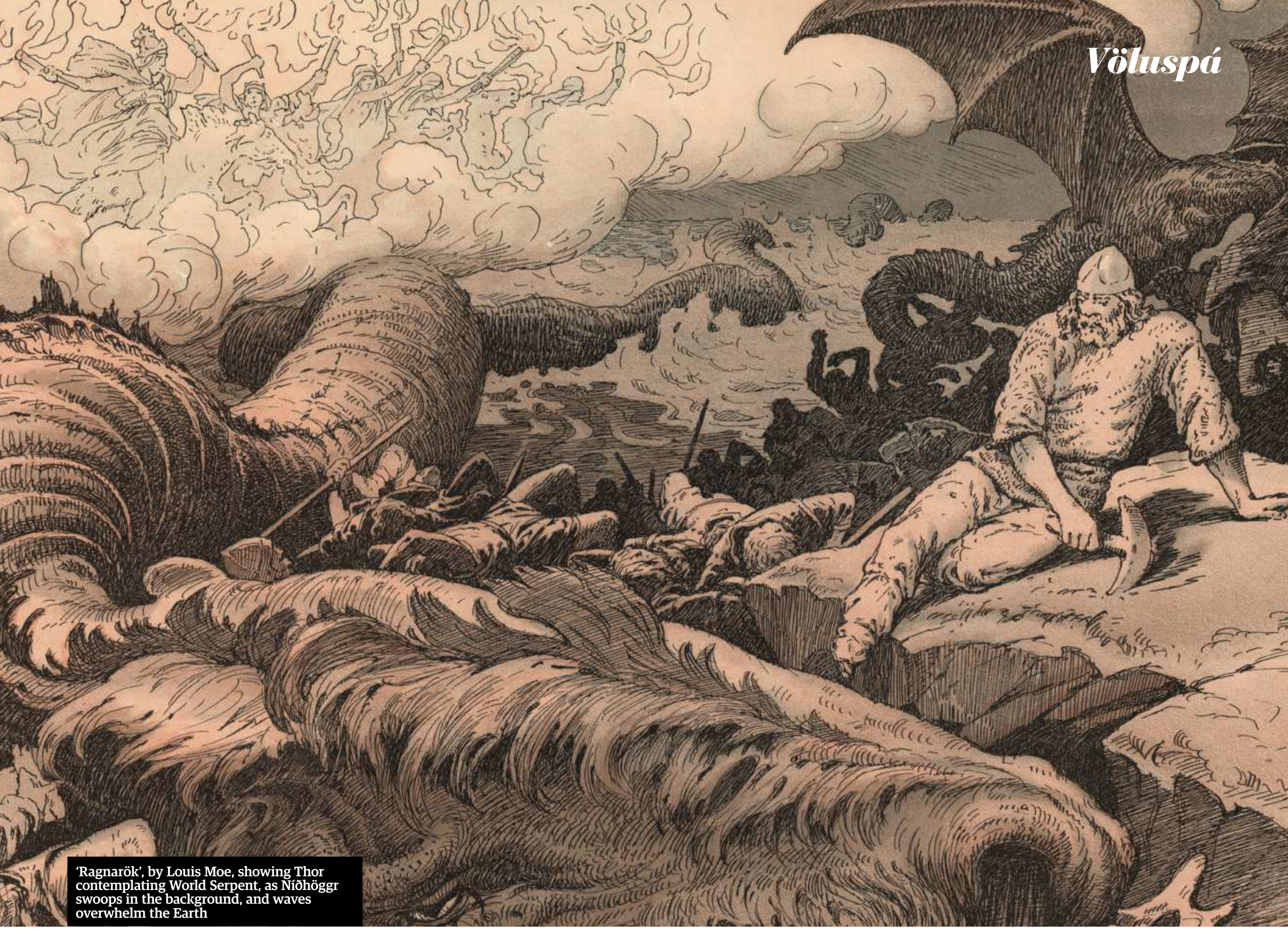
It's said that, during these times, brother will kill brother, and no one will be spared. The Earth will shudder under the weight of the violence of swords and axes, from the debauchery that transgresses even family bonds, and soon the world will sink. After a final council, the gods face their enemies in the bloody battle that is their fated doom. Odin will be eaten alive by Fenrir, Loki's wolf son; Thor defeats his nemesis, the World Serpent, in combat, only to fall to the ground after just nine steps, able to take no more after being subjected to its poisonous breath; Freyr will be killed by the warrior giant who rules the

The Elder Edda

We are still unsure as to who originally created *Völuspá*, where it was written, or who, indeed, compiled the entire Elder Edda in which the poem appears, although many have suggested Sæmund the Wise, an earlier scholar who lived from 1056-1133 CE, as the man who compiled the Poetic Edda. Many scholars argue that *Völuspá* is too rich in pagan imagery, with an unparalleled force of belief and vividness, for it to have been written by a Christian intent on archaising the tale; most say that it was written – without doubt – by a pagan. However, most also now accept the Christian ideas interwoven through the poem, particularly in the last stanza which mentions 'a mighty lord that rules over all'. Because of this, the poem is thought to date to the years where Scandinavia was transitioning from pagan beliefs to Christianity – at some point around the 10th century – and written by an Icelander with some exposure to Christianity.

A version of *Völuspá* also appears in *Hauksbók* ('book of Haukr'), which is thought to be penned by many people, yet mainly written and compiled by the Icelandic lawspeaker and knight of Norway, Haukr Erlendsson, in the 14th century. Originally one manuscript, it is now in three parts, with many portions being lost. This manuscript, like many others that still survive, is thought to contain fragments from older documents that recounted the myths, but now no longer exist.

While the poems preserve the words of the authors, and their voices speak to us through time, their faces are lost to us forever



'Ragnarök', by Louis Moe, showing Thor contemplating World Serpent, as Níðhöggr swoops in the background, and waves overwhelm the Earth

fiery realm of Muspelheim. The sun grows dark, the heavens blacken as the hot stars whirl down to earth, and fires touch the skies as the earth is submersed under the waters.

After a time, the seeress sees the Earth re-emerge once more from under the waters, and a lone eagle hovers above a mountain, fishing in a waterfall.

The surviving gods gather at their meeting place on the planes. Here, they ponder what has happened, and talk of the great battle, the World Serpent, and the wisdom of the runes. As a final moment, it's said that the golden games tables will once more stand in the verdant grass, as a symbol of brighter days.

In the aftermath, Baldr and his blind brother, Höðr, will return from Hel to live once more among the gods, and the fields of the land spring up, fertile and bearing crops without being sown. Two sons will inhabit the world, and the hall of Gimlé – the post-Ragnarök world – will be thatched with gold, as the righteous rulers live happily thereafter.

Yet, here, at the end, we see the shadowy dragon Níðhöggr rise once more. Only this time, he carries the corpses of men on the backs of his wings as he flies. Many think that the dragon Níðhöggr is the herald that announces the beginning of Ragnarök – but is he instead a symbol of renewal, as the world is reborn into a new day? At this, the völva, too, sinks; her prophecy is at an end.

"The earth will shudder under the weight of the violence of swords and axes"

While some may say the happenings recounted in *Völuspá* are nothing more than stories crafted by an active imagination, it's thought that the worship of the Vanir originated in the Baltic, and around the North Sea, later spreading northwards to Scandinavia. One might expect conflict when two different belief systems confront each other for the first time, and many scholars believe that this is the explanation for the Æsir-Vanir war of mythology. Only when the belief systems – and pantheons – were conflated, and merged into one mythology did the frictions subside. Indeed, it's said that the war ended only when hostages were finally exchanged. Scholars have argued that this myth runs parallel to the idea of an invasion of Germanic fertility belief systems by a more sanguine religion; for instance the invasion of the Indo-Europeans, which would fit well with the descriptions of how the Vanir pitted themselves against the Æsir gods. The historical accuracy of the events described in *Völuspá* – and indeed the Edda as a whole – is still widely debated by scholars, but it's widely believed that the stories preserved in these mythologies may well be fictionalised accounts of real events.

Was there a true history of clashing cultures, of a battle to rival all others, that begun when hostages were taken from one tribe and mistreated by another? We will never know the truth of these events; instead we are left to match these remnants of poems – passed down across generations – to the fragments left in the archaeological record in our imaginations only. Too little exists to ever be completely sure of their truth. Yet with these vellum leaves, and these dark tales of death and destruction, we can see into the minds of old; a glimpse back in time, into an era when war was commonplace and magic ruled. As the ships that once creaked through primordial waters were carried along by the waves as sea serpents lashed at their creaking planks, these tales are carried down to us through whispers of the poets of old so that we too may know their secrets. And on days dark with rain and thunder, when the ocean's waves are battering the land as if the World Serpent, Jörmungandr, himself has unleashed his mighty tail, we too can listen carefully for the quiet call of three solitary roosters, in case they are followed by the fateful trumpeting of the Gjallarhorn from realms unseen…

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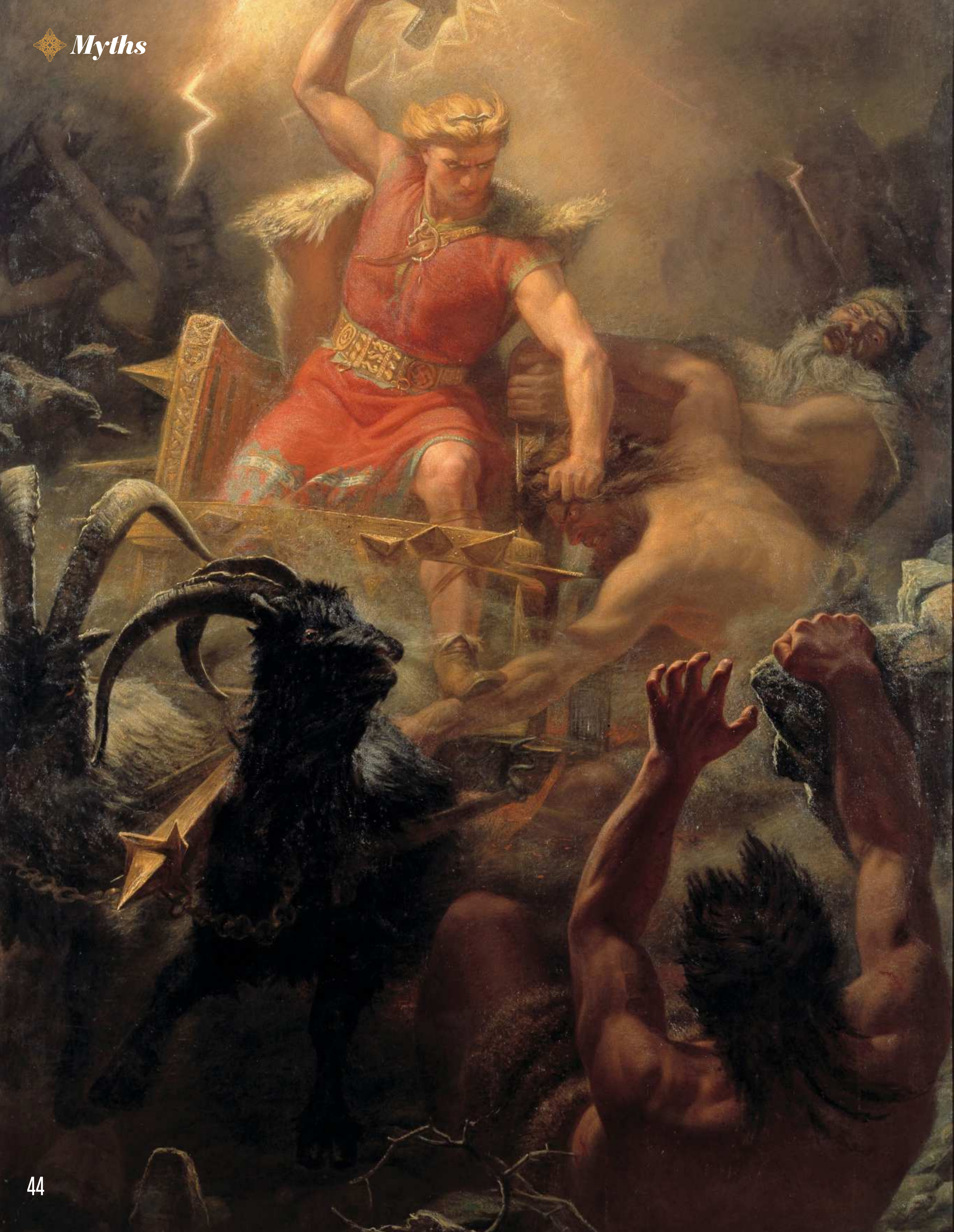


THE POETIC EDDA

In a world of gods, monsters and heroes, the Poetic Edda explained the workings of the universe

Written by Ben Gazur

“Silence I ask from the holy races,
From Heimdall’s sons, men high and low;
You will it, Odin, that I relate
Old tales I remember, of men long ago”

So begins the poem, *Völuspá*, which opens the Poetic Edda. In it a völva, a female Norse seer and shaman, speaks directly to Odin, leader of the Norse gods. She tells him of the creation of the universe and of its end to come. Of the deeds which occur between those times, many are covered by the rest of the Poetic Edda.

It is important to know that there is no one text called the Poetic Edda. Rather, it is a collection of Norse poems composed by many people, at many times, and from many places. They have diverse themes relating to the gods, the nature of the universe, and the actions of heroes. None of the authors of the poems in the Edda are known. Most likely the tales were composed by singers who passed them on to others over centuries before they were written down in the 14th century. A manuscript from that time called the *Codex Regius* contains many, though not all, of the poems usually considered part of the Poetic Edda.

The poems of the Edda can be split largely into two parts: those concerned with the gods, and those with human heroic deeds. As the gods were here first, it is those that will be dealt with first.

Creation

In the beginning there was the frost giant Ymir. Where he lived there was only a chaotic expanse; no sand, no sea, no Earth below, nor heaven above. We are told there was not even grass. From the ice around Ymir sprang the gods that would give birth to Odin and his siblings. It was Odin and his brothers who slew Ymir. From his flesh they made the ground, and his blood became the raging sea. His bones turned to hills and his hair to swaying trees. From the giant’s skull they lifted the dome of heaven and set in place the Sun and Moon. Ymir’s brain drifts over the sky as lowering clouds. Odin and his brothers raised up Midgard - our world - for humans and made it burst forth with vegetation. Now, with a realm to rule over, the gods held a council and to each thing they gave a name and put each thing in its place. It was a golden age of the gods, and all was well. Only with the coming of three giant maidens was disorder brought into the world.

One day the gods found two humans - beings without life and without a fate, made of driftwood - on the beach. To them the gods gave spirit, and sense, and the warm blood which gives them life. These were the first humans, Ask and Embla, from whom all others are descended.

Over the universe stands the ash tree Yggdrasil, noblest of trees. The three roots of the tree connect the worlds of Hel (where the dead reside), the land of the frost giants, and the human world. At the base of the tree are more serpents than you can imagine, including the huge dragon Níðhöggr, who gnawed ceaselessly at Yggdrasil’s roots. At the top is perched an eagle who sees all things. A squirrel with a slanderous tongue runs between the dragon and the eagle to spread discord between them.

Thor’s unexpected wedding

One morning Thor, god of thunder, awoke to find his mighty hammer, Mjölnir, was missing. In a rage he searched for it, but could not find it anywhere in heaven or on Earth. To help in his search the wily Loki borrowed from the goddess Freyja a cloak of falcon feathers which would let him fly over the many realms.

In the land of the giants, Loki found the frost giant Þrymr looking very pleased with himself. He told Loki that he had buried Mjölnir a full eight miles deep and if any harm came to him then none would ever find it. The only way Thor would get his hammer back was if Freyja, goddess of love and beauty, was given to Þrymr as his wife.

On hearing this, Thor rushed to Freyja and commanded her to put on her wedding dress and follow him. Understandably Freyja wished to know more about her prospective husband. Her wrath on being told it was a frost giant shook the whole of heaven. A council of the gods was called to settle matters. Since Freyja would not trade herself for a hammer, Thor would have to take her place. On his bearded face they placed the bridal veil, on his chest they draped jewelled necklaces, and his beefy legs were hidden with a feminine gown. Þrymr was amazed to see his new wife arrive at his hall for the wedding feast. Never had he seen a woman eat so heartily. A whole ox disappeared behind the veil, washed down by endless barrels of mead. When Þrymr lifted the veil to steal a kiss from his bride he found her glowering eyes so terrifying that he leapt back. Despite his suspicions, the frost giant laid Mjölnir in her lap to consecrate their wedding.

Thor tore off his disguise, his hammer now back in his hand. None of the giants at the feast were spared as he brought his hammer down on each in turn. No giant would be able to boast that they had seen the god of thunder in a dress.

The feast of the gods

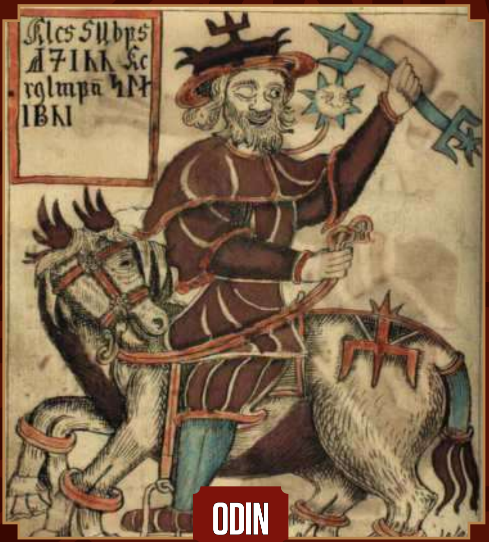
The Norse deities, like the Norse themselves, enjoyed a drink. One day, they decided to settle in for a feast with the friendly sea giant Ægir. The only problem is that Ægir did not have a cauldron large enough to hold all the mead necessary for such a divine drinking bout. The god Tyr remembered that his father Hymir had a cauldron a mile deep that could satisfy even the thirstiest of the gods.

Hymir was unwilling to part with his prize cauldron though, and forced Thor to prove his worth. Taking out a fishing vessel, Hymir reeled in two enormous whales. To out-do him, Thor baited his hook with the head of an ox. The bait lured in the fearsome serpent Jörmungandr, whose body surrounds the whole earth. Unable to wrestle the lashing beast aboard, Thor’s prey escaped, to the mockery of Hymir. But to prove his strength, Thor carried the fishing boat, whales and all, back to Hymir’s hall. Still, Hymir would not part with his cauldron. Only if Thor could break one dainty glass goblet would he release the cauldron.

Thor smashed pillars, roof beams, and his hammer against the enchanted glass but did not even chip it. Only one thing was harder than the goblet - Hymir’s head. When Thor hurled it at Hymir the glass shattered. Thor left Hymir, carrying the cauldron on his back like a turtle with a shell.

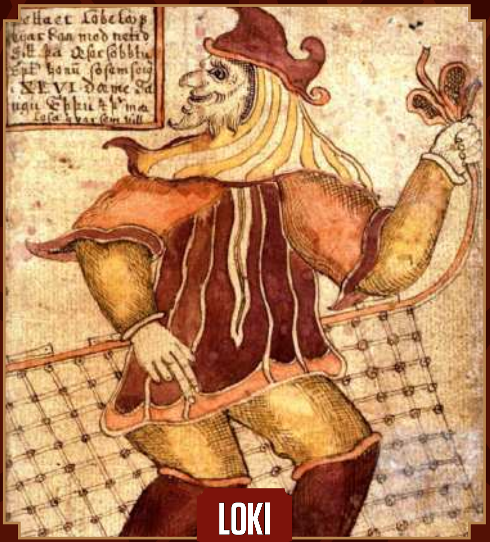
All was well at the gods’ eternal feast until Loki, the trickster god, arrived. All guests to the celebration were welcomed by the servants of the gods, Fimafeng and Eldir. Fed up with the praise the gods lavished on their loyal servants, Loki murdered Fimafeng. But instead of receiving the praise he craved, the gods cast Loki out into the dark woods

GODS, HEROES AND WARRIOR KINGS



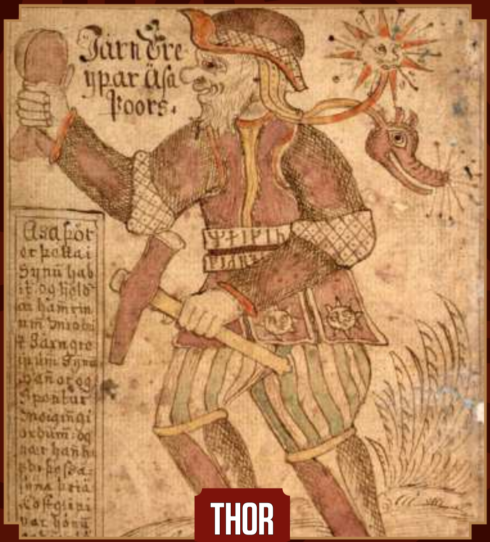
ODIN

Leader of the Norse gods, Odin was revered for his knowledge and wisdom as well as his fearsome skills in battle. His ravens Huginn and Muninn flew across the worlds of gods and men and told Odin all that was happening. Odin ruled over Valhalla, the hall where all those who died bravely in battle were taken. At Ragnarok these warriors will join in the battle on the side of the gods.



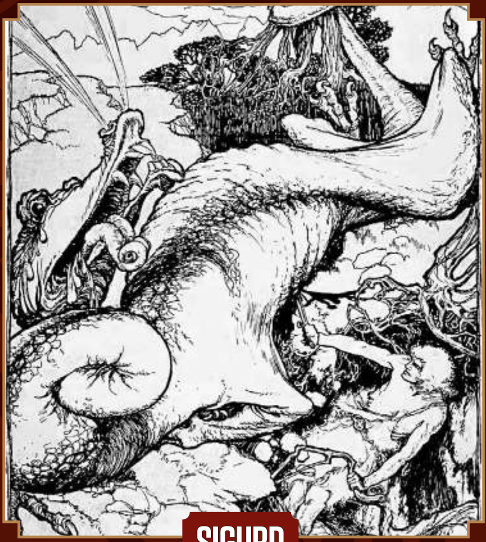
LOKI

Loki is the trickster god of the Norse pantheon. He uses his cunning to both help the gods and to trick them. For his part in killing the god Baldr, Loki is punished by being locked beneath the earth where his struggling causes earthquakes. He was the father of Hel, ruler of the underworld, Fenrir, a giant wolf that will kill Odin at Ragnarok, and Jörmungandr, the sea serpent that surrounds the world.



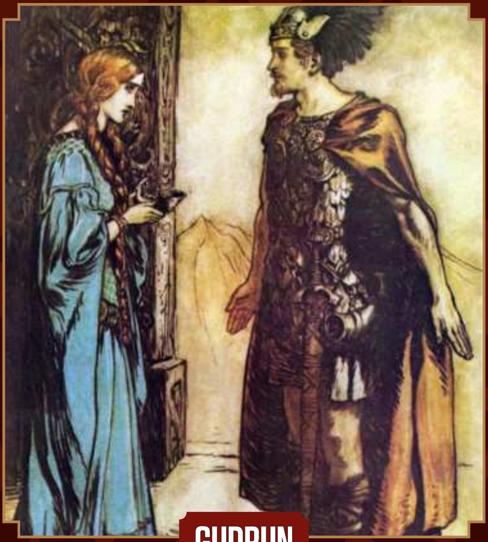
THOR

One of the most well-known of the Norse gods today, Thor is the god of thunder, strength, and fertility. He was invoked by sailors to quell storms. With his powerful hammer, known as Mjölnir, Thor protects the gods from any who would threaten them. While terrifyingly powerful, Thor is not the brightest of deities and has been known to appear in myths and legends as a comic figure.



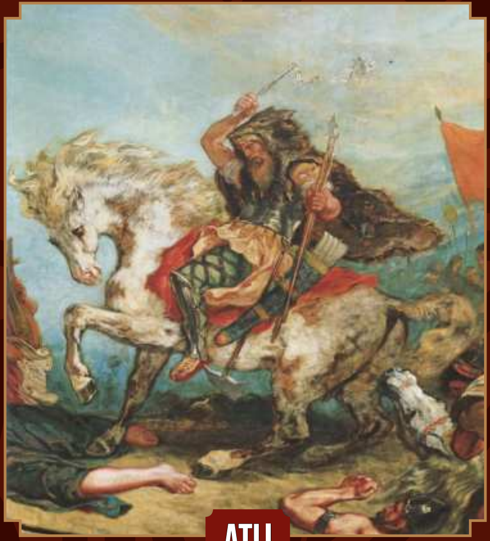
SIGURD

A legendary Norse hero, Sigurd appears in many tales and art throughout northern Europe. A mighty warrior who slew the dragon Fafnir, he is later murdered by his brothers-in-law who seek the cursed treasure he took from the dragon's lair. In later centuries, he became a focus for German nationalism in art, including in Wagner's Ring cycle of operas.



GUDRUN

Gudrun is the wife of Sigurd, but after Sigurd is killed by her brothers, she marries Atli the Hun. Atli plots against her brothers, luring them to a deadly trap. Gudrun gets revenge by murdering Atli and their sons, and burning down Atli's palace. She attempted to kill herself by drowning but was rescued and married to another king with whom she raised more sons.



ATLI

Atli is a mighty barbarian king who married Gudrun in hope of receiving Sigurd's treasure. When Gudrun's brothers refuse to tell him where the gold is hidden, he kills them, for which Gudrun murders him. Atli is based on the historical figure Attila the Hun, who died at his own wedding - but it is unlikely that it was by a rampage of revenge on the part of his bride.

beyond. When he returned and Eldir tried to bar his entry, Loki threatened to murder him too in his rage.

Inside Loki found the gods at ease in the golden hall, peacefully talking of their great deeds and works. Loki chastised the gods for forgetting the laws of hospitality that bound them and demanded a drink. Finding none offered he poured out his scorn for each of them in turn. Some he accused of cowardice, some of sexual deviancy, others got a dose of Loki's inventive lies. Thor, not a god to fight with speech, met crooked words with hammer blows and drove Loki from the hall. Loki fled and transformed into a salmon in a stream – but even there the gods found him and caught him. None ever forgot the curses that Loki had spoken at the feast.

Baldr's dreams

Baldr, the precious son of Odin and Frigg, was beloved of the other gods. When Baldr began to suffer terrible nightmares, the other gods called a council – the dreams of gods are not to be ignored. None of the gods could interpret the meaning of the dreams, so Odin mounted his eight-legged horse Sleipnir and descended to the misty hall of Hel.

Finding the grave of a witch, he used charms to call her forth against her will. Using all his guile he made her reveal what she knew of Baldr's dreams and what they meant. The witch perceived the mead and armour that would be laid out for Baldr's funeral. Baldr was doomed to die; a fate which none of the gods could change. The witch named Baldr's killer – his twin brother Höðr. Höðr would be tricked by Loki into throwing a sharp sprig of mistletoe, the only thing able to injure Baldr, at his brother. Piercing his heart, it would kill him.

Odin was understandably disturbed by this prophesy. Yet worse was foretold. Baldr's death was merely the prelude to the end of days – Ragnarok.

Ragnarok

All came to pass as the witch had foreseen. For his role in the death of Baldr, Loki was chained beneath the earth. Above him in the cavern a terrible snake was set, which dripped poison in his eyes. Loki's wife sat dutifully beside him to catch the venom in a jar but when it was full and had to be emptied, the poison burned Loki's face. His frantic struggling caused earthquakes. Only when the universe itself is shaken by Ragnarok would Loki be able to escape his bonds.

The Poetic Edda hints darkly at what will happen in the struggle between the gods and agents of chaos at the end of time. In that time, brother will kill brother, the gods' homes will be painted red with gore, and the sun will shine black. Worse is to follow as all the monsters of Norse myth unite against the gods. Fenrir, a monstrous wolf and the child of Loki, will eat Odin. Thor will battle against the huge serpent which encircles the earth. Thor will kill the snake, but die himself before he takes nine steps. Flames will shoot up and lick the vault of heaven as Yggdrasil, the world-tree, totters.

Yet there is hope. A woman and a man, Líf and Lífþrasir, will survive Ragnarok. From the universal ashes will arise a fertile world and their children will multiply across the new earth. So ends the tales of the gods as recounted by the Poetic Edda. Yet for the Norse, the gods were real presences in the world – and though we move now into the tales of heroes, the gods play their part in shaping events.

The heroic deeds of Helgi

King Hjorvarth had made an oath that he would have the most beautiful of women to be his wife. In his search he found that the fairest woman was Sigrlin, daughter of King Svafnir. Svafnir would not give Sigrlin to Hjorvarth, nor would he give her to another king who wooed her called Hrothmar. Hrothmar, in his rage, plundered the land of Svafnir, burned the forests, and murdered the king. Hjorvarth, in the shadow of the smoke and destruction, stole Sigrlin away to be his wife.

Together they had a son. No name would stick to their boy and he grew into a silent man. One day he was watching from a hill when nine Valkyries, warrior women who carry the heroic dead to Valhalla, rode past. One of the Valkyries, named Svava, called out to him. "Helgi, if you do not speak you shall never have hoards of gold!" Helgi, taking the name she offered, shouted back his thanks and his love for the Valkyrie. Ever after, Svava shielded Helgi in battle and rescued him from harm.

Using a magic sword promised to him by Svava, Helgi slew King Hrothmar and returned with the treasure stolen from his grandfather's hall. With the sword he killed many giants and performed mighty deeds. Now a hero and king, he asked for – and got – Svava's hand in marriage.

When Helgi took a deadly wound in a duel, he called Svava to him. He told her to take his brother as her new husband, but Svava swore she would never take a man of no fame into her arms. With a kiss, Helgi died. Svava laid herself down and slept the sleep of the dead.

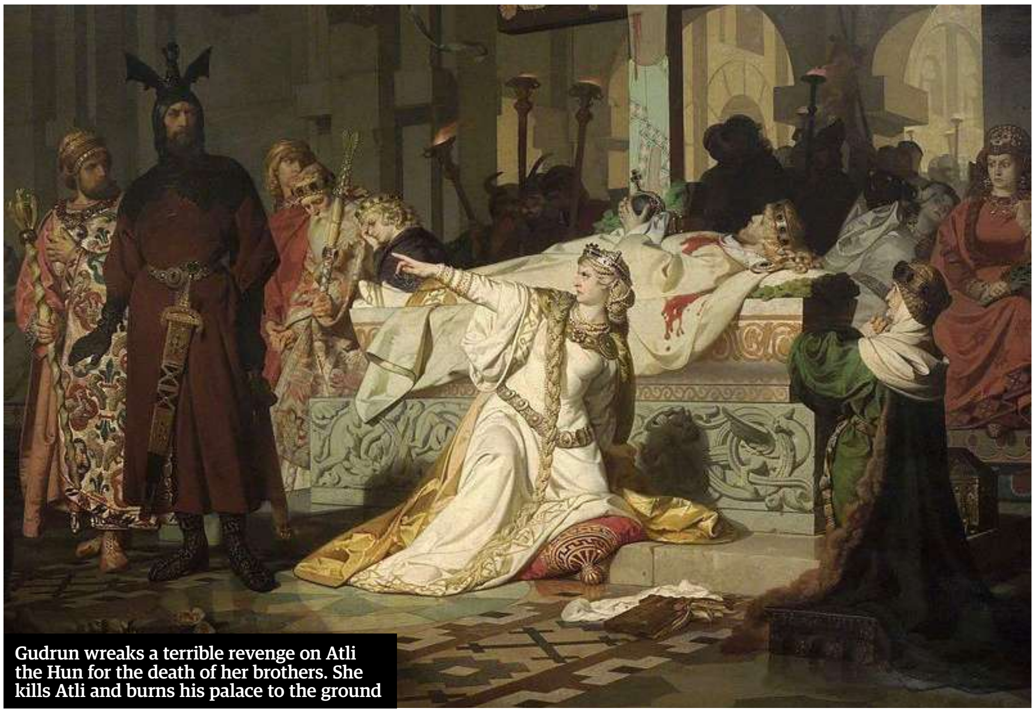
However, death cannot keep a good man down. A boy named Helgi was born to Sigmund whom the Norns, guardians of fate, had given a heroic destiny. As a child, this Helgi took up a sword and became a fierce warrior. At 15 he slew the ruler Hunding. Hunding's sons sought to claim weregild (gold) to recompense them for their loss. Helgi refused and led his men into battle with Hunding's sons, killing them all. Looking over the bloody field of victory, he saw the sparkling light of the Valkyries riding to collect the honourable dead.

One leapt from her horse and ran to Helgi. Her name was Sigrún, but she had been Svava and she revealed to the young Helgi his past life. Sigrún had been promised by her father to another man, but Helgi would not let her marry anyone else. He raised an army and killed everyone in the kingdom that opposed their marriage. Only Sigrún's brother, Dag, was spared, but he prayed to Odin for revenge.

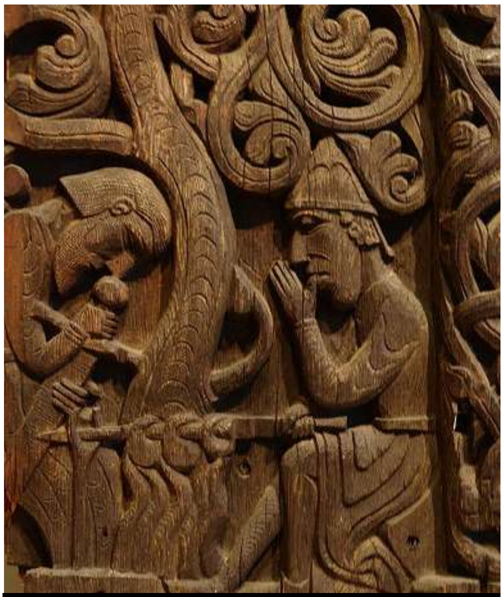
Helgi and Sigrún were not fated to be married long. To strike back at Helgi, Dag was given an enchanted spear by Odin. Dag murdered Helgi and left his body in the dirt. Sigrún cursed her brother, but nothing would raise her husband back to life. Sigrún had a burial mound raised for Helgi's body as Helgi's soul was welcomed to Valhalla by Odin.

One night, a handmaid saw Helgi riding back to his tomb as if still alive. Sigrún rushed to the tomb as soon as the news reached her. There she found her husband and the two were granted a night together. In the morning, Helgi had to go, to ride into

"For the pagan Norse, the old gods were real presences in their world"



Gudrun wreaks a terrible revenge on Atli the Hun for the death of her brothers. She kills Atli and burns his palace to the ground



Sigurd the warrior killed Fafnir the dragon and tasted his blood, gaining wisdom. The image became a popular one in Norse art

the reddening sky, but Sigrún could not give him up again. She had a bed made in the burial mound. There she laid down and died of her sorrows. But it is said that Helgi and Sigrún were reborn into this life one more time.

The red gold

Revenge does not die easily in Norse legends. Helgi, who had murdered Hunding and his sons, had a half-brother called Sigurd. Though Helgi had been carried away to Valhalla, there were still members of Hunding's family who lived and carried a thirst for vengeance with them. The Hundings massed together and struck at Helgi's remaining family, slaughtering all of the menfolk - except for Sigurd who was carried to safety by his mother. Now the Hundings had murdered both Sigurd's father and grandfather. Sigurd was raised to be a noble and deadly warrior, and the memory of the wrongs done to his family drove him to be an ever more lethal foe.

To further his knowledge and skill at arms and magic, Sigurd travelled to study under the tutelage of the dwarf Regin. Regin told his student the tale of his father and brothers and the red gold that destroyed them. Regin's brother Ótr was able to transform into an otter and often swam in the stream beside their home to catch salmon. One day, Odin and Loki passed by and saw this sleek otter. Loki threw a stone, which killed it, and the gods stripped it of its pelt. Next, they came to the home of Hreithmar, father to Regin, Ótr, and Fafnir. Seeing their kin's skin, the dwarves seized the gods and would only ransom them for enough gold to fill the otter skin and enough to cover it over entirely.

Loki was sent to gather the gold and captured the fabulously rich dwarf Andvari. He took the dwarf's treasure but noticed the dwarf held back a single gold ring. This ring was magical and had drawn all the rest of the red gold to the dwarf. Snatching it for himself, Loki returned to ransom Odin. But Andvari cursed the red gold so that no one would ever have joy from his stolen treasure.

Loki filled the pelt of Ótr with gold, and piled more gold on top until the pelt was entirely hidden. The gold ring, however, he held back for himself. Noticing that a single whisker stood out from the gold, Hreithmar commanded that the ring be added to cover it. Loki told the dwarf that neither he nor his sons would prosper from their new-found wealth.

Once the gods had departed, the sons of Hreithmar, Regin and Fafnir, asked for their share of the gold. He refused. While the old dwarf slept, Fafnir stole into his bedroom and thrust a sword into his father. Fafnir took for himself the entirety of the treasure, and denied Regin his rightful inheritance. To guard his ill-gotten treasure, Fafnir transformed himself into a dragon with viciously sharp teeth and claws. On his head, the dragon wore a helm that caused all to look on it to tremble with fear.

After telling Sigurd of his family's tragedy, Regin used all his powers to forge the sword Gram for his pupil. So sharp was Gram that, when thrust down into the Rhine, it cut a strand of wool that drifted against it. So strong was Gram that Sigurd cleft Regin's anvil in two with it. Now Regin urged Sigurd to use Gram to slay Fafnir, but Sigurd refused. He still carried the urge to be avenged against the killers of his father and grandfather, the Hundings. Once the Hundings were slain in battle with Sigurd though, Regin returned to pushing Sigurd into killing the dragon, his brother.

The dragon slayer

Though Fafnir feared losing his treasure above all else, he still had leave his lair to eat and drink. Regin the dwarf led Sigurd to the place where Fafnir guarded his hoard. Sigurd noted the trench formed in the earth as the monstrous dragon hauled its body out each day to drink from a river. Here, the hero dug a trench and concealed himself within. As Fafnir emerged from his hole he passed over the trench and Sigurd thrust the sword Gram up into his belly.

The dragon raged and twisted against Gram, driving the blade ever more deeply in. Dying, the dragon addressed his killer. He asked who it was who killed him but Sigurd guarded his name as greedily as the dragon had his treasure. Fafnir used his dying breaths to tell Sigurd that the gold and rings would be his bane. The dragon's advice was for Sigurd to ride home and live a peaceful life. He warned that his brother Regin would betray Sigurd for the gold. But heroes are not so easily dissuaded.

Regin returned once Fafnir was safely dead and greeted Sigurd as the bravest of all men. Though, the dwarf added, he had also played his role as it was he who forged Gram. Sigurd would not have his honour taken from him and told Regin that the heart is more important than the weapon in a fight. The dwarf then cut out the dragon's heart and drank the red blood from the wound. Regin told Sigurd to roast the heart for he would eat it when he awoke from his nap. When Sigurd thought the heart was cooked he tested it with a finger. Burning it, he put the finger in his mouth and tasted the blood of the slain dragon.

Suddenly the chatter of the birds turned to language and Sigurd understood all they said. They warned him of the betrayal that Regin had in his heart. At once, Sigurd beheaded the sleeping dwarf. He ate the heart of the dragon and drank the blood of both dead dwarves to gain their wisdom. While taking the red gold for himself and the fearful helmet that the dragon had worn, Sigurd was told by the birds that on a certain mountain he would meet a sleeping Valkyrie who could help him in his training.

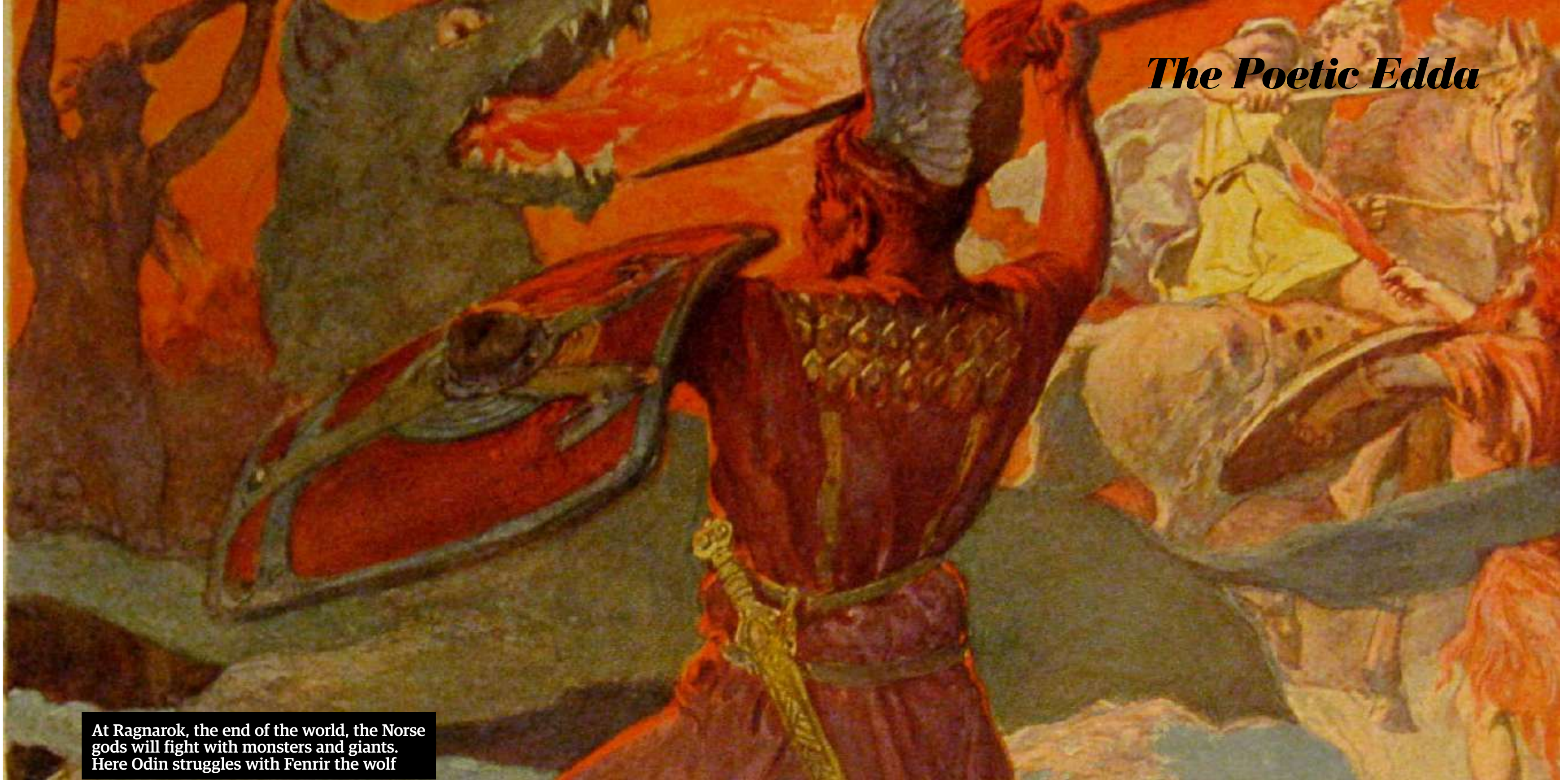
Gudrun and the Niflungs

Sigurd rode his horse to the appointed mountain. Fires as high as heaven roared around it but he plunged onward and breached the flames. There he found the Valkyrie sleeping under a pile of shields. For defying Odin, the Valkyrie was cursed to sleep when she refused to marry the man he wished her to. So long had she slept that her armour had sunk into her flesh. Only by cutting it loose could Sigurd

The royal book

The *Codex Regius* is the manuscript from which most of the Poetic Edda is taken. Written in the 1270s it is the source of many Norse legends that are attested nowhere else. When it was discovered by Brynjolf Sveinsson, a bishop sent by the Danish king to recover old manuscripts, he believed it was the source used by Snorri Sturluson in writing his Prose Edda. It is not known where the bishop discovered the *Codex Regius*. The *Codex Regius* contains ten poems about the Norse gods and 19 dealing with the Sigurd legends. At some point a whole set of pages was torn from the book. Known as the Great Lacuna, this gap amounts to around 16 pages of the Sigurd poems. Thanks to copies in other texts it is possible to reconstruct much of what would have been on those lost pages. It is not known when the poems within the *Codex Regius* were composed. Internal evidence and the style of the texts points to some being as early as 900 CE, with others being written later. Due to its age and importance to Norse history, when the *Codex Regius* was returned to Iceland from Denmark in 1971 it was not entrusted to a plane but, fittingly for the great Viking text, put aboard a ship and transported with a military escort. Eager crowds awaited its return to its native land.

The *Codex Regius* was written in a small book and without illustration, meaning it was likely for personal use and not display



At Ragnarok, the end of the world, the Norse gods will fight with monsters and giants. Here Odin struggles with Fenrir the wolf

rouse her. For this service the Valkyrie taught Sigurd how to read the mystic runes and poured him out a measure of the mead of knowledge.

Despite the wisdom offered by the Valkyrie, Sigurd's life would not be easy. Even the book which preserved his story suffered. In the *Codex Regius* a large portion of the narrative was pulled out at some point, leaving us with few of Sigurd's deeds and leaping straight to the point of his death.

Sigurd married a woman called Gudrun but was sent to help her brother Gunnar to woo Brynhild. Brynhild found she could not love her husband Gunnar and became fixated on Sigurd. Her love drove her husband to hate Sigurd, and to envy the red gold he had in his possession. Gudrun's brothers, the Niflungs, plotted to kill Sigurd and sent their youngest to murder him. Sigurd was stabbed, but threw the glittering blade Gram and cut his attacker in half. The grievously wounded Sigurd returned to his bed and died beside Gudrun, telling her of Brynhild's role in his murder. When Brynhild heard Gudrun's grief reverberating through the palace, she laughed. Her husband Gunnar reviled her but she boasted of having only loved Sigurd. Then she drove the point of her sword through her heart and Brynhild chased her beloved Sigurd down the long road to death.

Atli the Hun

Brynhild was sister to the mighty king Atli of the Huns. Fearing the wrath of Atli, the Niflungs offered him Gudrun in marriage. Atli was greedy for gold and knew of the red gold that had been Sigurd's, and assumed his new bride would come bearing a portion of the hoard. She came wearing only the ring that Loki had tried to keep for himself.

Atli invited Gudrun's brothers Hogni and Gunnar to visit his realm, offering them rich rewards and grants of land. Assuming they would come carrying the red gold, Atli planned to murder them and take it for his own. Knowing it to be a trap, Gudrun took the ring she wore and tied a wolf hair to it, sending it to her brothers as a warning. The brothers saw the potential threat, but went anyway to Atli's hall.

As soon as they entered, Gudrun shouted to them to flee but it was too late. Gunnar was surrounded by guards, but Hogni cut his way through eight men with his sword before being captured. Atli questioned Gunnar sharply; he wished to know where the red gold was. Only with the red gold would Gunnar be able to buy his life. But Gunnar scoffed at the high king and asked to see his brother's heart if Atli was serious about killing them. The king's men went and cut the heart from a cowardly man and showed it to Gunnar. Gunnar mocked it. "See how it quivers, that is not my brother's brave heart." So Atli ordered Hogni to be killed. He laughed as they cut out his heart. Gunnar recognised the heart and crowed in triumph. "Now no one knows where the red gold lies but me." Atli bound Gunnar with ropes and tossed him into a pit of venomous vipers for his defiance. Gudrun passed Gunnar a harp with which to lull the serpents to sleep, playing it with his toes because his hands were bound. All but one snake fell asleep, an adder which bit and killed Gunnar.

With her brothers now dead, Gudrun brought down terrible vengeance on Atli. She killed the two sons that she had borne to the king and roasted up their hearts. Soaked in sweet honey, she fed them to her husband. Gudrun revealed to Atli what he had just eaten as she cut him down with a sword. Into the hall where he was feasting with his men she threw a torch, setting the whole building ablaze. Barring the doors, Gudrun waited until Atli and all his men were reduced to ashes.

Of gods and heroes

The stories of Gudrun's revenge do not end there, nor do any of the stories of the gods and heroes that the Poetic Edda tells. They have been woven into the common myths of many countries, yet much is revealed about the Norse way of life in particular. The heroic tales are woven around a cycle of killings and the revenge demanded by family honour.

The origins of Sigurd's myth are lost in time. Some scholars see him as an entirely fictional figure while others find parallels of his story in historically attested people. One theory is that Sigurd is a fictional representation of Sigebert I, who married Brunhilda of Austrasia and was killed at the instigation of his brother's wife. Not all agree with this identification, however. What can be said with certainty is that Sigurd's legend was a popular one. Runestones carved with pictures of Sigurd's deeds have been found in many areas that were once under Norse rule. Typically, he is shown stabbing upwards into a dragon's belly. Carvings of Sigurd are also found in Norse churches and Christian crosses in churchyards. It has been suggested that in the slaying of Fafnir the dragon, Norse Christians saw a reflection of Jesus' triumph over the Devil. Perhaps he was simply too popular a folk hero to be ignored.

One figure from the Eddas that everyone agrees was a real figure is Atli – or as most people know him today, Attila the Hun. In the 5th century, Attila burst out of the east and led his army across much of western Europe. Attila's hold on European imagination was so great that when an enemy was required the mightiest foe that could be conjured was the Hun.

As to the Norse gods – whose names still resonate through the days of the week – much can be learned about the people who worshipped them from the stories they told. The cunning of Loki is always punished, and the brute force of Thor always wins out in the end. Yet wisdom is also highly prized – Odin hanged himself and died in pursuit of knowledge, and traded an eye for insight. That the old gods' poems survived the Christianisation of the Norse tells us much about their power. Even after Christianity came to Iceland, people held onto the old gods in some way. Helgi Eyvindarson said on land he had faith in Jesus, but on the sea he believed in Thor.

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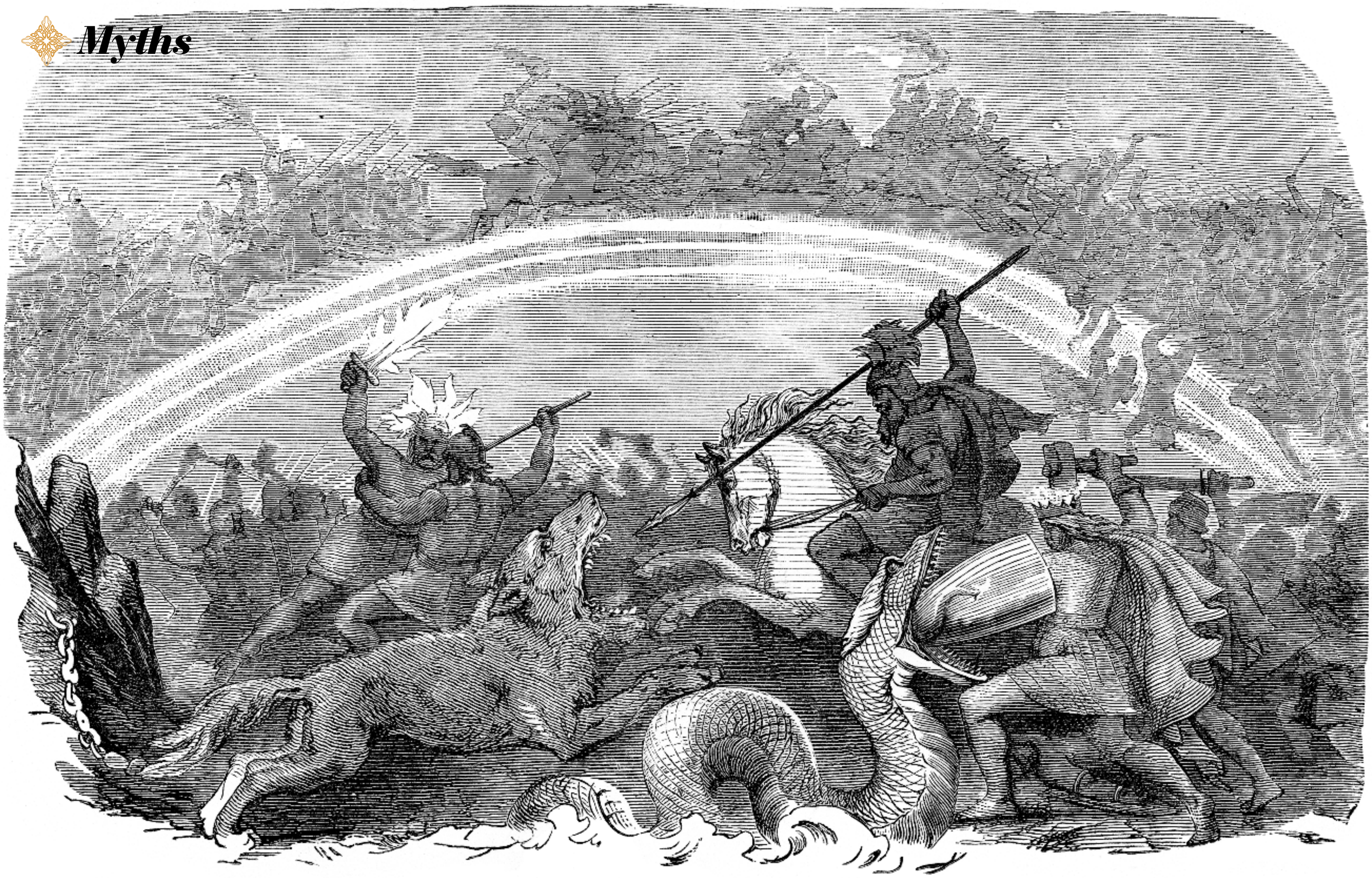


THE PROSE EDDA: A HISTORY

While the Edda was a compilation of Viking mythology, how much of what Snorri recounted were the true tales of the Icelandic people's ancient past?

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

The year is 1220 CE, and we are in Iceland. The scholar and chieftain, Snorri Sturluson, sits at his table. Fragmented myths - told in the cryptic style of the skaldic poets - whirr through his mind. Their mystical beauty entrances him, and their mythic symbolism shines through the verses that have been passed from generation to generation for centuries. He sets himself a task that no man has dared before: to take these fragments and give them a story. He dreams of the snippets bound together, with a coherent back story for the gods, goddesses, and legendary heroes, that tells the ancient Viking Age tales of his people in a way that his Christian contemporaries can understand and accept; stories that will entrance all from the blacksmith of the smallest settlement, right up to the greatest jarl. To accomplish this feat, Snorri embellished the mythologies, tying together the threads of oral tales, and older manuscripts - now believed to be lost to time - making the Prose Edda one of the most important works on Norse mythology and the early beliefs of the Vikings before Christianity reached the shores of these cold, northern isles. What he created is a perfect handbook for any skaldic poet who wanted to hone his skills, and bring the magic of Viking myths and legends to his listeners in the most entrancing way imaginable.

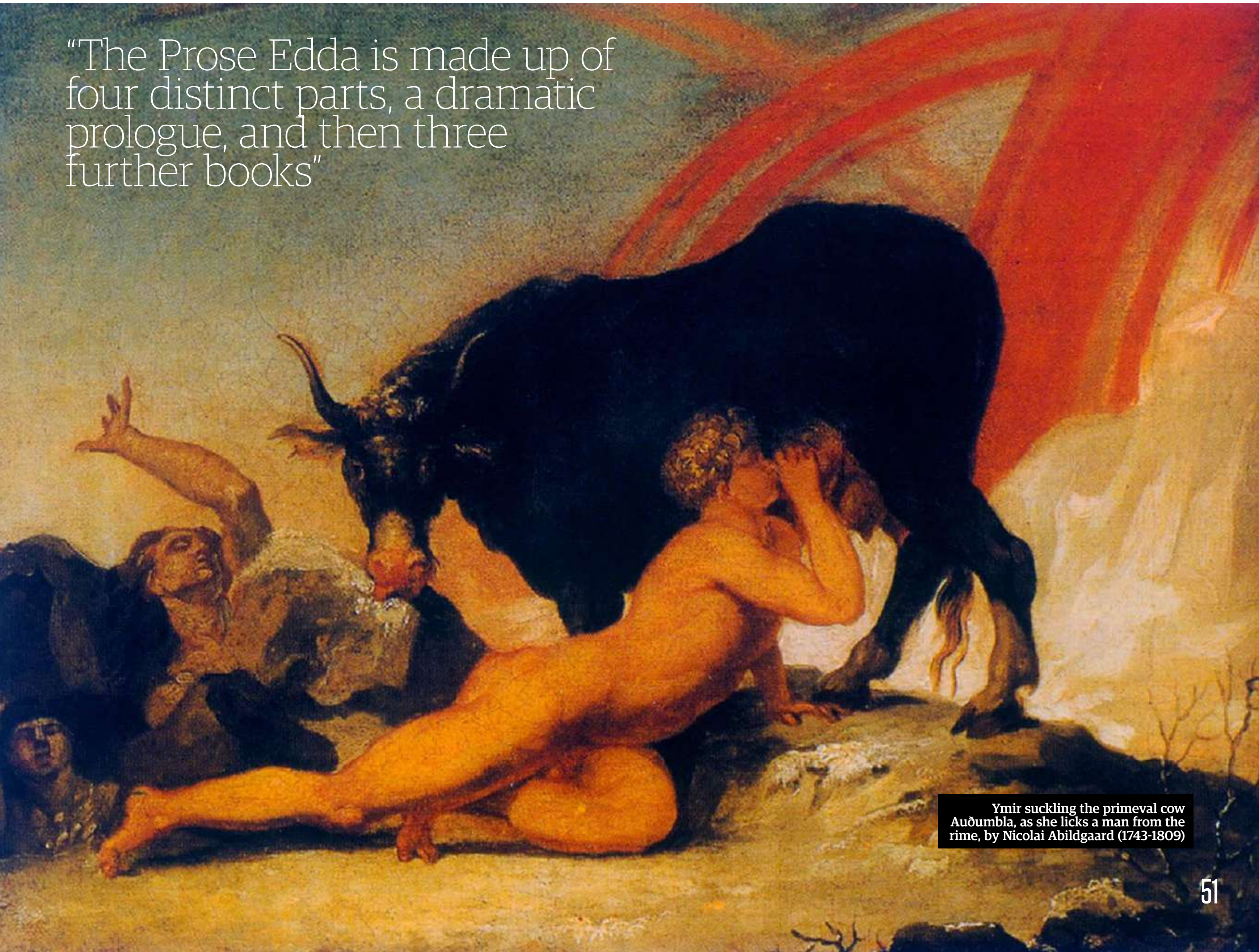
Much of what we know of Norse mythology - the tales of gods and heroes - was written between 800 and 1400 CE, during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, when the people of Scandinavia were exploring the seas, settling new lands, raiding and colonising. This world of kings and heroes was set to a backdrop of ancient myths that tell tales of heroic quests, magic, oaths and legendary races of creatures that have struck a chord with many, and been used to inspire literature, films and music even in the present day; the most famous example being that of JRR Tolkien's epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, which drew heavily on Scandinavian mythology.

Sometimes called the Younger Edda, Snorra Edda – or even just Edda – Snorri's narrative tales are not to be confused with another famous work on Norse mythology, now known as the 'Elder Edda', 'Poetic Edda', or *Codex Regius*. This collection of poetic manuscripts was put together roughly a generation after Snorri's death, around 1275 CE, transcribed from earlier oral myths and legends thought to have already existed for centuries. The Poetic Edda is often cited as the single most important source, recording the early sacred myths and cosmological world view of the early Icelanders and Scandinavians before their conversion to Christianity, with the Prose Edda coming a close second. Scholars are still uncertain where the term 'Edda' originated, though some say it means 'poetic art', while others say that it indicates collected, ancient knowledge since the same word is used for 'great-grandmother' in Old Icelandic. The Prose Edda is made up of four distinct parts: a dramatic prologue, and then three further books: *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál* and, finally, *Háttatal*.

Drawing on the earlier myths, the Prose Edda was written long after Christianity had reached the shores of the northern lands, and the religion's influence on the myths recounted in the Prose Edda is astonishing. The prologue to this body of sacred myths begins with the tale of Adam and Eve, and a great flood that submerged the earth at God's command in retribution for mankind turning against his ways. Here, only eight souls survive this as they were safely closeted on to the ark by Noah himself. This sets the scene for the repopulation of the world, and the Norse creation myth follows in the next section: *Gylfaginning*, meaning 'the tricking of Gylfi'. This book takes the form of a conversation between Gangleri – the legendary King Gylfi in disguise – and three supernatural beings: High, Just-As-High, and Third, all manifestations of Odin, the Norse supreme god. Tales of love and disaster, of comedy and woe follow, as Gylfi questions the beings about the nature of existence, and the beings answer his questions by recounting old myths: stories of the gods, and also legends of famous heroes and their quests.

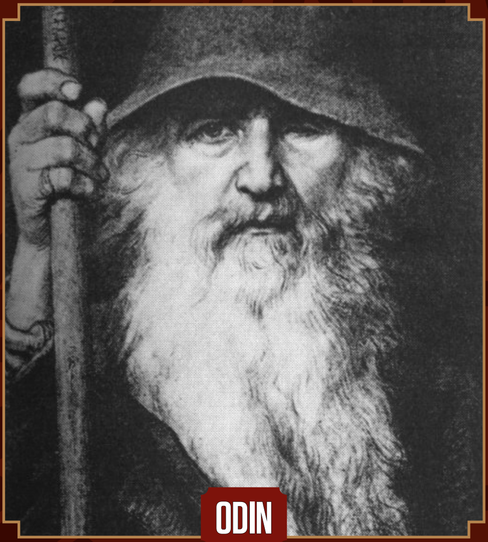
The beings tell how the earth was created when hot air melted the hoar frost of the primordial world, and the dripping rime led to the creation of a figure: Ymir, the first giant, who populated the world with jötnar – giants – and whose night-sweating grew generations from his limbs, as well as the magical cow, Auðumbla, who sustained them and produced rivers of milk. Soon, the cow began to lick the rime and uncovered a man, who went on to take a jötunn wife, and father three sons: Odin, Vili, and Vé. These three killed Ymir, and the rivulets of blood that flowed from his slaughtered body created a flood so great that it drowned every jötunn but two, who repopulated the earth once more. The three took his body to Ginnungagap, the formless void, and

"The Prose Edda is made up of four distinct parts, a dramatic prologue, and then three further books"



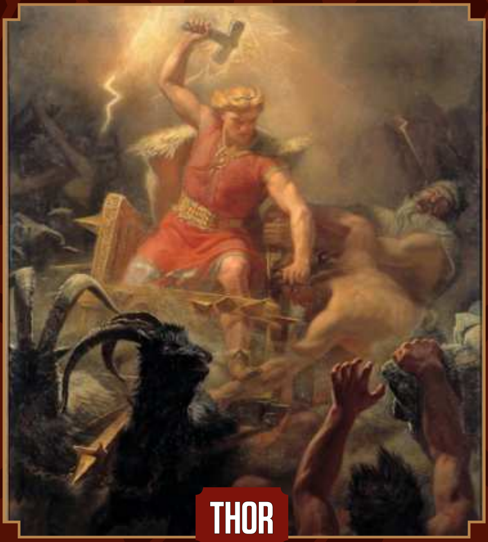
Ymir suckling the primeval cow Auðumbla, as she licks a man from the rime, by Nicolai Abildgaard (1743-1809)

THE OLD GODS OF THE PROSE EDDA



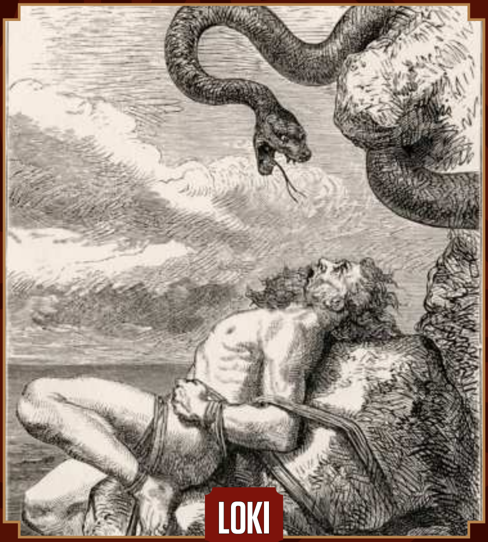
ODIN

Odin is the Allfather, the chief of the Norse gods, and patron of both warriors and poets alike. He is the god of death and sovereignty, sacrificing an eye for this power. He has an eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, as well as two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, who tell the god of all they see and hear after flying around the globe each day. It's said that Odin needs neither water nor food, as he can subsist merely on wine.



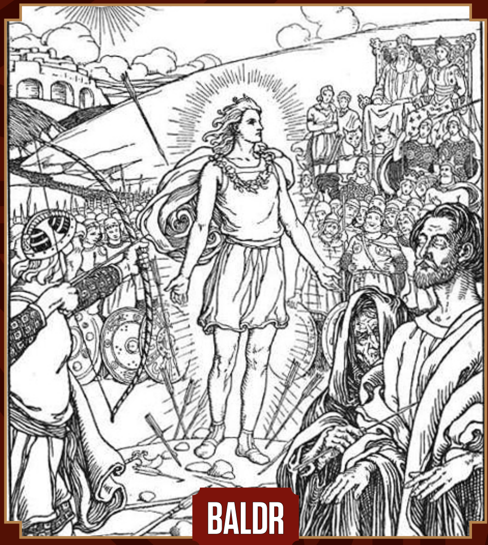
THOR

The prologue says that Thor is actually a prince of Troy, who became King of Thrace, yet the myths show him as a son of Odin - a sky god, who can control storms. A fighter god, Odin is sometimes seen as gullible, as he brandishes his famous hammer, Mjölnir, to kill giants and enemies like the Midgard Serpent. His chariot is pulled by two goats, Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjóstr, which Thor can eat and then revive.



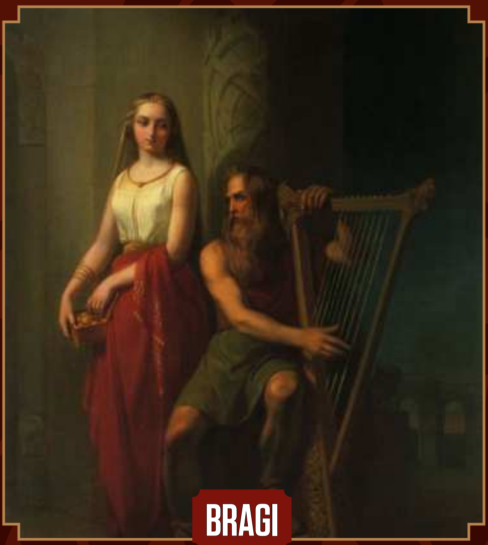
LOKI

Loki is 'noted amongst the Æsir', but he is also described as the 'disgrace of gods and men'. The son of a jötunn, he is seen as a trickster god. Loki is often the root of the gods' trouble, yet he often also saves them with his trickery. He fathered three monstrous children with the jötunn Angrboða: Fenrir the wolf, the serpent Jörmungandr, and Hel, who collects the sick and elderly in her eponymous underworld.



BALDR

Baldr is another son of Odin, the wisest of the Æsir gods, who is said to shine brightly. Both he and his mother, Frigg, had prophetic dreams of his death. Frigg went to all the creations on earth, and made them swear an oath never to hurt the god; yet all things made this oath except mistletoe. It is his death from a spear of mistletoe, made by the hand of Loki, which acts as the first catalyst for Ragnarök.

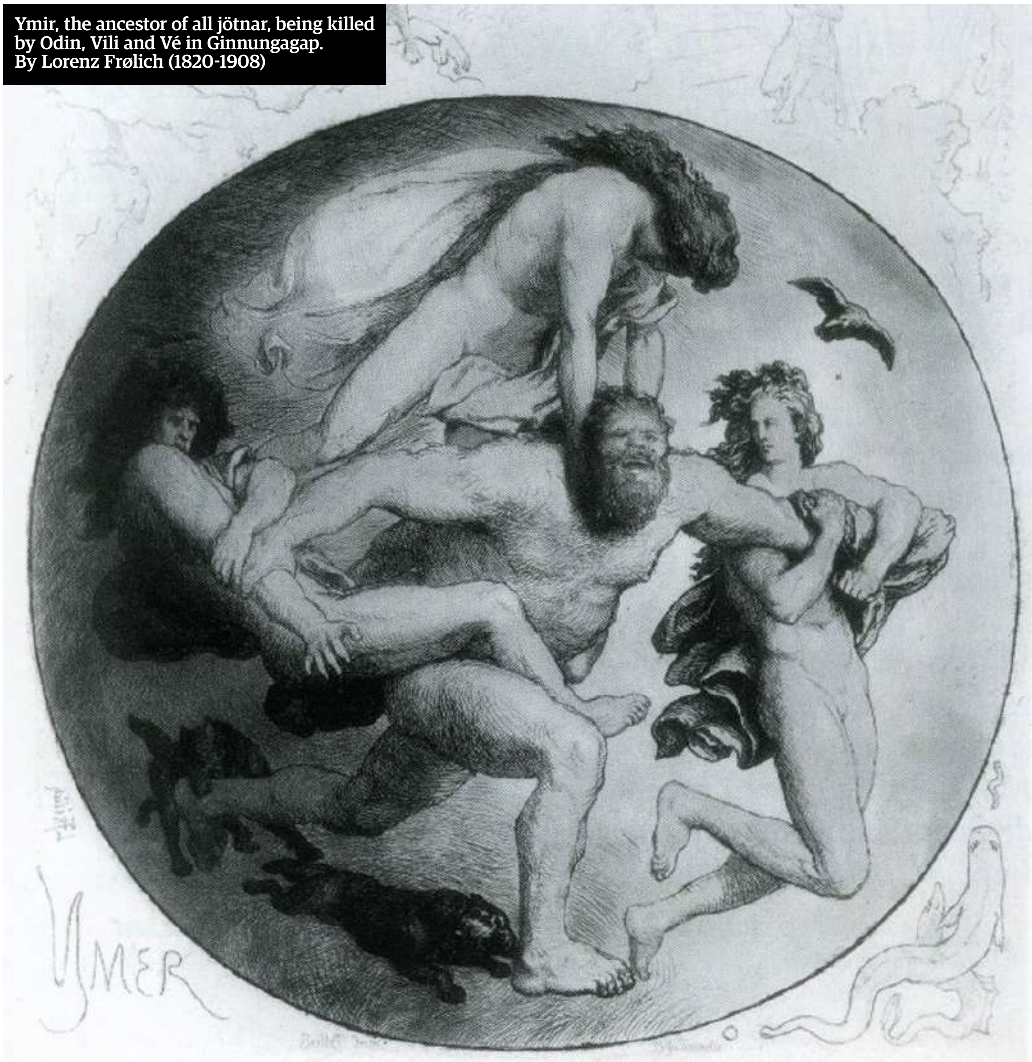


BRAGI

Bragi is another son of Odin, described in the Edda as a long-bearded god of wisdom. He is husband to Iðunn, keeper of the magical apples that restore the youth of the gods in their old age. Bragi is a skilled wordsmith, and is an accomplished skald, or poet. Because of him, poetry was called 'brag', and any poet who followed in his path would be called a 'bragr', to honour his eloquence.

from it created the earth from his flesh, the mountains from his bones, and the sky from his skull, which was held up above the earth at the corners by four dwarves. The name of the cow, Auðumbla, is one instance that scholars cite as evidence of Snorri having access to sources on the myths that no longer exist, as no record of this survives elsewhere. Throughout these tales, the beings hint at the final destiny of the gods: the ill-fated Ragnarök, the twilight of the Gods - a catastrophic battle where many gods will die, and the world will be destroyed, before being repopulated once more by mankind.

The next part of the Edda, *Skáldskaparmál* - meaning the 'Language of Poetry' - begins as a conversation between the sea god, Ægir, and the god of poetry, Bragi, where further myths are retold. Soon, they come to the business of kennings - poetic metaphors for people, places and things, and a list of these is given, along with their mythic origins. For example, fire is referred to as 'the bane of wood', a ship is a 'sea-steed', while gold can be called 'Sif's hair' - alluding to the tale of when Loki cut the goddess' hair clean off, only later paying for this deed by having a wig made for her from the finest gold by the dwarf, Dvalin, which magically grew like real



Ymir, the ancestor of all jötnar, being killed by Odin, Vili and Vé in Ginnungagap. By Lorenz Frølich (1820-1908)

> "Snorri's delight in linguistic trickery, wordplay and symbolism pervades every part of his work"

hair. Snorri's delight in linguistic trickery, wordplay and symbolism pervades every part of his work, and he dedicates much of the text to explaining how this is used in poetry. He discusses specific linguistic concepts like heiti, which are simple one-word synonyms, and the section acts like a thesaurus for would-be-poets of the time, listing words like 'steel' for 'weapons', and 'storm' for 'attack', as a way to bring to life the magical world of the mythical gods and heroes of ages past, and the battles and quests they took part in.

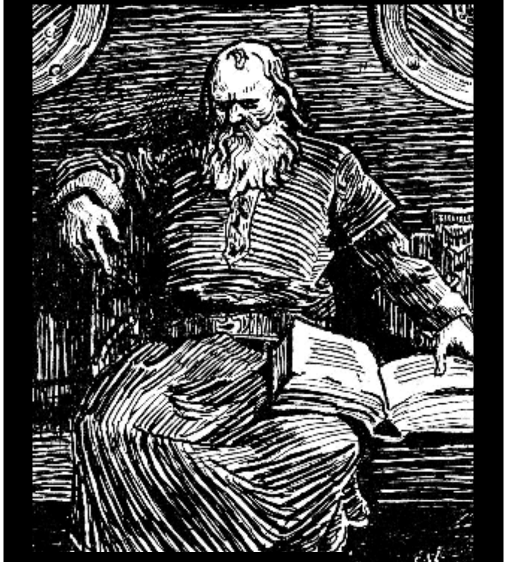
Háttatal, meaning 'list of verse forms', is the fourth part of the Prose Edda. Here, Snorri formulates this part as a discussion on skaldic poetry between a student and master, explaining the techniques of how to form poetry correctly, and the intricacies of traditional verse forms. Scattered throughout *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* are snippets of original skaldic poems from earlier Norwegian and Icelandic poets, as well as sections of Eddic poetry, ranging from pieces of old myths - preserved in the original words of the people who knew them as their own - as well as courtly poems, regaling the heroic deeds and achievements of the Norse kings from these earlier times. For many of these, the Prose Edda is now the only surviving record.

The history of Iceland sheds a valuable light on why the Prose Edda was created, and why it took the form it did. Unlike in neighbouring Norway, Christianity was not forced upon Iceland, a land that had been colonised by migrants at the edge of medieval Europe; the new religion was adopted by choice at the Alþingi gathering of 1000 CE. The Icelanders looked back to their pagan past, and their myth, as a source of inspiration. They prized the poetry and drama that was popular throughout the rest of Europe at that time, and invested in and valued their own cultural contribution to the arts: their tales and poems that underpinned their cultural identity as a proud people, with a rich history, and complex body of ancient mythology to tell the tale of their nation.

Snorri Sturluson

Snorri Sturluson was a 13th century Icelandic chieftain, thought to be the author of the Prose Edda. Born into a wealthy family in either 1178 or 1179 CE, Snorri was the son of Sturla, a chieftain from the western part of Iceland. When Snorri was two years old, one of the region's most powerful men, Jón Loftsson, a chieftain who ruled over Oddi in the south and a relation of the Norwegian royal family, offered to raise and educate the boy in order to settle a feud. Oddi housed one of the main centres of European education at this time, which led to opportunities that Snorri could never have otherwise imagined. He gained great status as a chieftain in his own right, marrying into a wealthy family, and twice being chosen as main law-speaker at the Alþingi - as this was the only public office in Iceland, it was one of the highest honours imaginable at the time.

In 1199 CE, Snorri married Herdís, the daughter of Bersi Vermundarson, yet the marriage was not to last: after much philandering Snorri settled as manager of an estate at Reykholt in 1206 CE - yet without his wife. He later remarried in 1224, this time to Hallveig Ormsdottir, granddaughter of the man who raised him. Following this, he became the most prominent chieftain in Iceland, yet a turbulent career followed, and his reputation was that of a troublemaker who wanted only to offer Iceland to the King of Norway, Haakon IV, raising armies and waging war to attain his aims. After making these dangerous alliances in Norway, and witnessing failed marriages between his children and their spouses from families of other Icelandic chieftains, his rule was threatened and his enemies grew. After staying for a time in Norway, Snorri fell out of favour with King Haakon, and was refused permission to return home to Iceland; yet Snorri defied this command and returned to Iceland in 1239 CE. The year after, Haakon charged two men with the task of murdering Snorri, which was initially unsuccessful, but the murder soon came to pass. Snorri was slain by his own sons-in-law during an assault on his home in Reykholt in 1241, acting on behalf of the Norwegian king.



Snorri Sturluson, depicted by Christian Krohg (1890s)

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LEGENDS

The legendary Viking heroes fought mythical monsters and real-life armies on their incredible adventures

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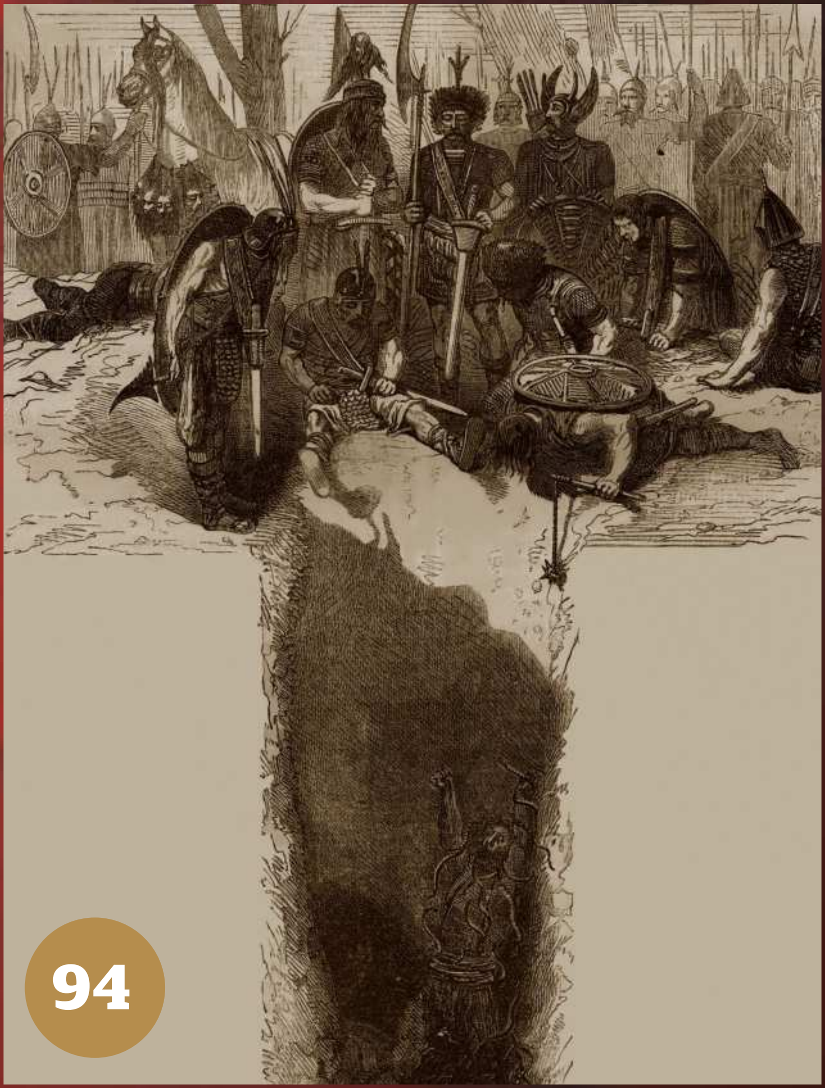
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Adventuring across the entire Viking world

The stories of the Norse heroes remind us quite how much of northern Europe the loosely affiliated Viking civilisations commanded. While much of the action takes place on the continental mass that encompasses the key territories of what are now Norway, Denmark and Sweden, they also take in more southerly locations including northern England, Burgundy (a region between what are now France and Germany) and Lombardy (now in northern Italy). Meanwhile, the majority of the stories themselves were recorded in Iceland, and the stories themselves subtly change depending on their geographical origin. One particularly obvious example is in the various retellings of the *Völsunga saga*. In more traditionally Nordic territories one of its key female figures is known by the Norse name Gudrun, while in Germanic territories she is referred to as the more Saxon-sounding Kriemhild.

EVROPA
ASIA
PARS

A valkyrie tends a dying hero, preparing to take his soul to the mystical afterlife hall of Valhalla

VIKING HEROES

The heroes of legend are mythical, although their tales try to tie together ancient gods and real-life kings

Bridging the gap between the mythical gods of the early tales and the historical kings of the later sagas are the heroes of Norse legend. Presented as genuine figures from history, their superhuman feats of combat, often against supernatural creatures, have more in common with fairy stories than fact. They are often larger-than-life archetypes, bearers of mystical swords and magical rings. Yet their behaviour often has more in common with what would become the chivalrous ideals of medieval warrior Christians than it does with the bloody pagan traditions of the northern past. Christianity was introduced to Scandinavia by both sword and subterfuge, and once it took root, it changed the shape of the sagas forever.

The now predominantly Christian authors, anxious to preserve their cultural heritage without it conflicting with their new faith, and influenced by stories the well-travelled Vikings brought back to Scandinavia, now transformed the old gods into semi-classical heroes. Odin is reimagined as a Trojan princeling: a powerful warrior and wily sorcerer. It takes a few verbal leaps of faith, including the explanation that the old term for the gods, aesir, in fact translates as 'men of Asia', but soon this new genealogy for the old gods is accepted into the stories as if it had always been the gospel truth. The great skald Snorri Sturluson even goes as far as claiming that the trickster Loki is in fact the Homeric Greek hero Odysseus, explaining that this is why the 'Trojan' aesir hate him despite his resourcefulness.

Even Odin's role as the Allfather is kept intact, though modified. The now-Trojan prince, inspired by a prophecy that tells him "his name should be exalted in the northern part of the world and glorified above the fame of all other kings", sets off for the Scandinavian homelands. In Saxland (Germany), some of his sons found the Frankish dynasty of the Völsungs. In Jutland, another son founds the Scylding dynasty, from which the kings of Denmark reputedly descend. In Sweden, yet another son becomes king, founding the Yngling dynasty. The same happens in Norway. Odin is now no longer the father of the gods, but rather an ancient Nordic Queen Victoria, the grandfather of all of the Scandinavian royal lines. It's from these legendary houses that the great heroes and heroines of Norse myth descend. Setting out on journeys to distant lands, they come face-to-face with dragons and dwarves, win and lose riddle games, fight deadly battles and acquire magical artefacts.

There's a very good reason why these tales have resonated down the centuries. When these stories were first created, it was an adventurous and wealthy people that made them. They lived in climates that encouraged long winter evenings by the fireside, but had travelled extensively and become familiar with new stories from much further afield. Worldly, often more comfortably off than their homelands suggested, and raised amid a tradition of oral storytelling, the audience for these tales of heroes demanded exciting stories of action and adventure, packed with the machinations of gods, ghosts and the natural world itself.

© Getty, Alamy

The warrior woman Hervor took her father's cursed sword from his grave

HERVOR, KING HEIÐREK, AND THE CURSED SWORD

This epic family saga of rivalry, murder, vengeance, and conquests spans six generations, instigated by the forging of a cursed sword

Written by Jerry Glover

King Sigrlami ruled over Gardariki, which spanned the lands between Lake Ladoga and the Dnieper river in Russia. When the king was out hunting on his steed one day, he became separated from his men, and at twilight, he chanced upon a great megalithic stone with two dwarfs standing beside it. Using his iron sword he prevented them from entering the stone, causing them to beg for his mercy. He learned their names: Dvalin and Dulin.

"Since you two are the most crafty of all the dwarfs," said the king, "you must make me your best sword. I want the boss and the grip to be made of gold. It needs to hew iron as easily as cloth and must never rust. It will be victorious in battle and single combat for whoever uses it." The dwarfs agreed and on an appointed day they presented him with the sword. It was indeed magnificent. From the doorway, Dvalin drawled, "That sword will cause the death of a man every time it is drawn. Three dreadful acts will be done with sword, and it will also slay your kin, Sigrlami." As the king slashed at the dwarfs they darted into the stone, the door closing behind them. The sword was fully embedded into the stone. Sigrlami called the sword Tyrfing. Neither man nor beast could live a day if it wounded them, no matter how slightly. Its strike was perfectly consistent, always ensuring victory.

Arngrim was a famous Viking who stayed awhile with King Sigrlami in Gardariki, becoming his chief general and the husband of his daughter, Eyfura. The couple went north, settling on Bolm island where they had 12 sons. Eldest and most famous of the sons was Angantyr. Then there was Hjorvard, Hervard, Hrani, Brami, Barri, Reifnir, Tind, Saeming, Bui and the two Haddings. They were berserker champions, always winning their battles. All kings granted them anything they wanted.

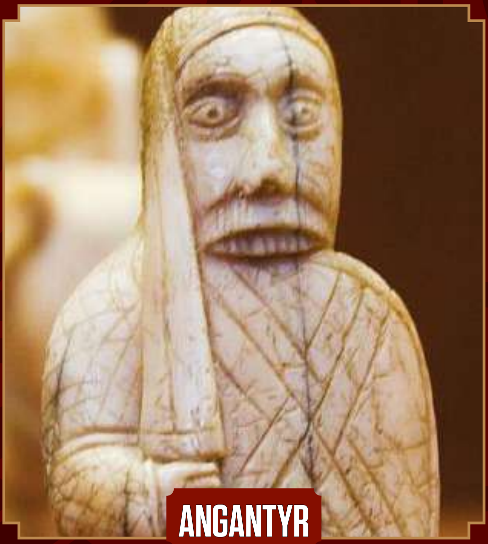
One Yule-eve the men swore oaths at the chief's cup. Hjorvard vowed to marry the daughter of Ingjald, king of the Swedes, or else die in the attempt. As the king pondered this, doughty Hjalmar rose, reminding the king of how much honour he had brought to him, and how many times he had risked his life. In return, he begged for the hand of the king's daughter, Ingeborg, rating himself better than the berserkers who had done nothing but evil in his realm. After thinking, the king deemed that both men were so great and noble he would allow his daughter to chose the one she preferred. She said that she wanted the one that was known to be good rather than the one beset by evil rumours.

Hjorvard challenged Hjalmar to a duel on Samsey island, cursing him as a widely reviled outcast if he married the lady before resolving their contest. Hjalmar said nothing could stop him, and Arngrim's sons returned to their father to tell him what transpired, to which he replied that he had never previously feared for them on their travels.

The brothers went to Jarl Bjarmar, who welcomed them with a feast. That evening, Angantyr asked the

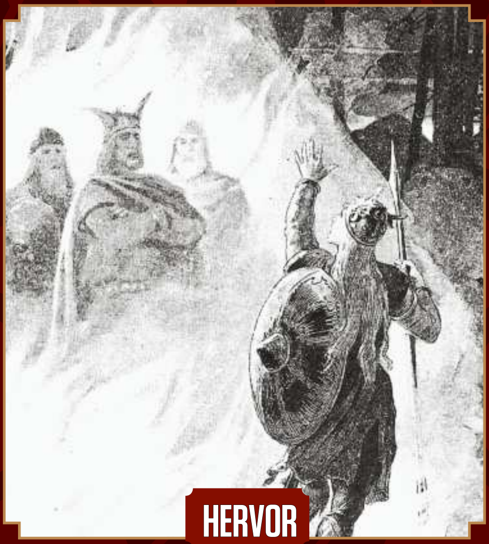
DIE BY THE SWORD

A dwarven curse becomes a terrible legacy



ANGANTYR

Three characters share this name, spanning the generations of a family. The first one is a Berserker, the eldest son of Arngrim. He marries Svafa, daughter of Jarl Bjarmar, and at some point acquires the cursed sword Tyrfing from King Sigrlami, the circumstances of which are unknown. He is summoned from his burial mound by his daughter Hervor, who compels him to give her the sword. His grandson is also called Angantyr, a son of Hofund and Hervor who is accidentally killed by his brother Heiðrek. The third Angantyr is the son of Heiðrek and Helga. In one curious episode, he is reported to have suddenly died and his body is replaced by a dog, yet he survives to avenge the death of his father Heiðrek by killing the slaves who murdered him and retaking Tyrfing.



HERVOR

Two Hervors feature in the eponymous saga. The first is the daughter of Angantyr (and Svafa, and is nurtured by her grandfather, Jarl Bjarmar. She shuns traditional female household pursuits, preferring training with weapons to become a valkyrie-like fighter. When a slave teases her about her incestuous, lowly ancestry, Hervor's indignation prompts her to travel to an island where, in the saga's oldest and most famous episode, and disguised as a man, she braves the fires of her ancestor's burial mounds and commands her dead father to rise and give her the cursed sword Tyrfing. The second Hervor is the daughter of Heiðrek, and is foster-fathered by Jarl Frodmar in England. She is also a warrior, killed at the Battle of the Goths and the Huns along with her brother, Angantyr.

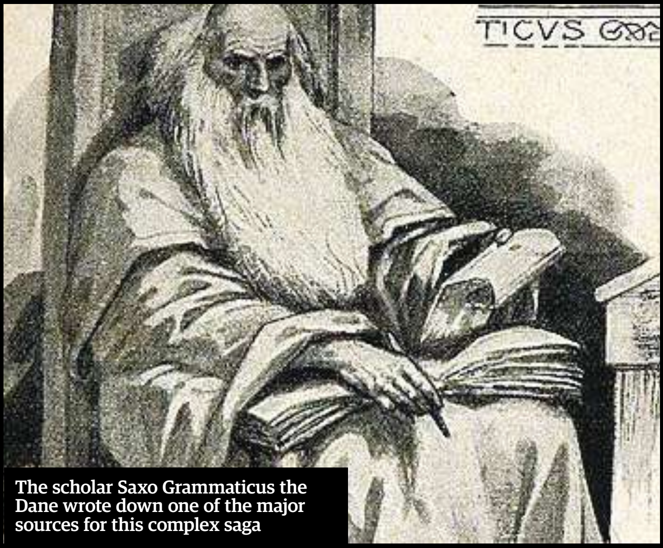
HEIÐREK

The titular character Heiðrek is a complex blend of hero and anti-hero. The son of Hofund and the first Hervor, his rebellious and quarrelsome nature results in him becoming an outlaw after the manslaughter of his brother, Angantyr. As wielder of Tyrfing, he is victorious against King Harald's enemies in Jutland, and in Hunland. Yet the honour and popularity earned by his conquests is given over to tragedies. Not only is he cursed by the possession of Tyrfing, the father of the gods, Odin, curses him for daring to attack the All-father with the sword after losing a riddle game. With his foster-son and mistress dead by his own hand, he ends by being murdered. His life illustrates both the curse of the sword, and the penalty for his determined disobeying of his father's advice.

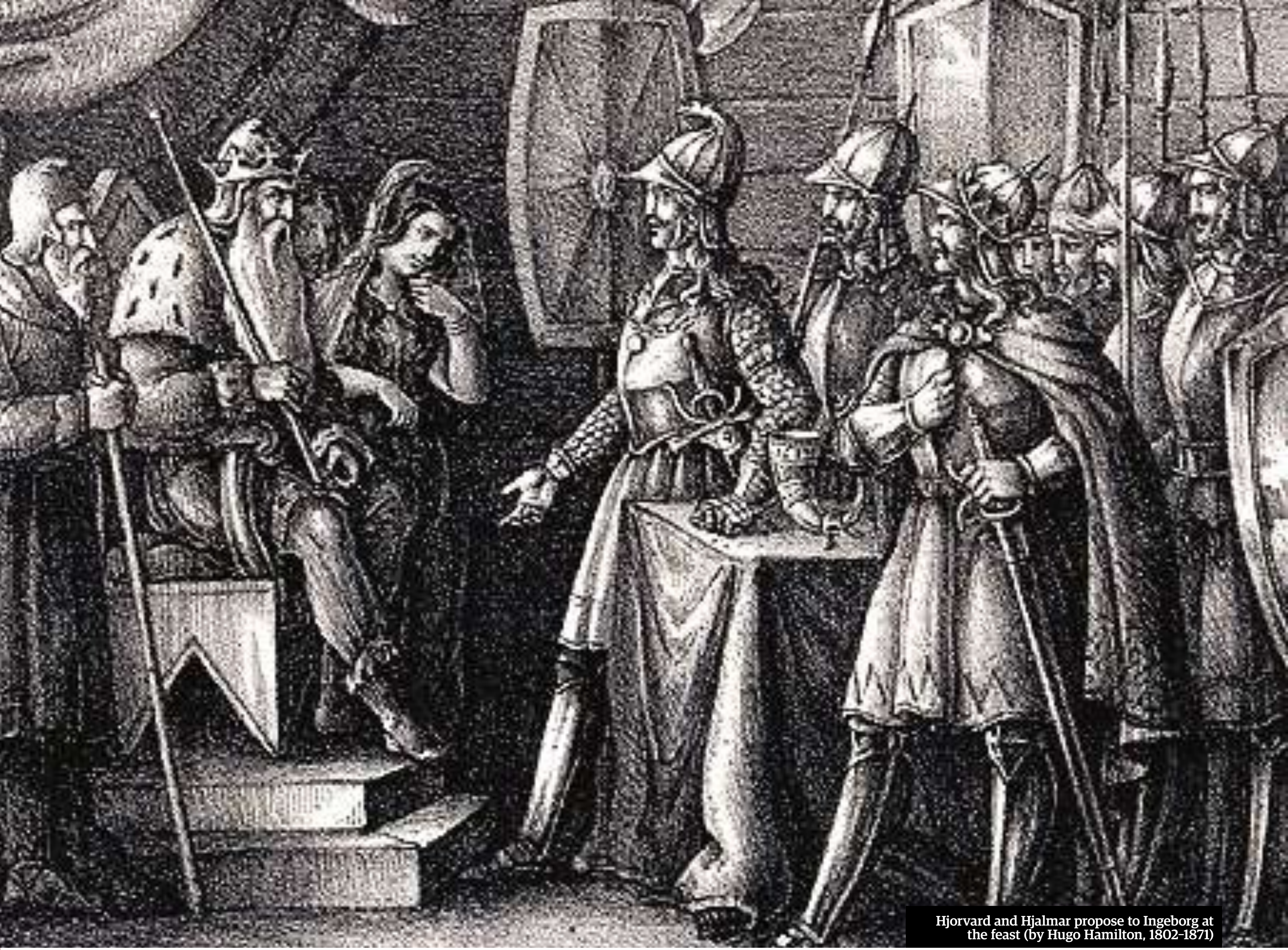
Cursed generations

Where does this multilayered story actually come from?

Hervor and Heiðrek's saga belongs to the sagas of ancient times, Norse sagas that predated the colonisation of Iceland. Modern translations fuse three original sources: two written on vellum, dating from the early 14th and 15th centuries, and a paper manuscript from the mid-17th century. The older version comes from the *Hauksbók*, mostly written by an Icelandic Law Speaker, Haukr Erlendsson. According to the *Sturlunga saga* (c. 1300) a farmer named Hrolf of Skalmarnes recited the saga of Hromund Gripsson during a wedding in northwest Iceland in 1119. In this, Hrongvid the Viking breaks into the burial mound of Thrainn, an undead witch-king who had killed 420 men with his enchanted sword Mistletoe. This scene foreshadows one of the oldest and most famous scenes of this saga, when Hervor raises her dead father Angantyr at the burning burial mounds. This proves how the roots of this tale were circulating at feasts almost two centuries before it was written (and some scholars believe they were current in Denmark at least another century or two prior to that). Similarly, the battle of Samsey island during which Hjalmar fights Angantyr and his berserkers appears in the saga of Arrow-Odd, another ancient saga, as well as in another book written in the late 12th century by Saxo Grammaticus the Dane. The tangled history of the known sources and written versions of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* shows how it was combined from innumerable voices at countless feasts and firesides, centuries before it occurred to anyone to write this magnificent story down.



The scholar Saxo Grammaticus the Dane wrote down one of the major sources for this complex saga



Hjorvard and Hjalmar propose to Ingeborg at the feast (by Hugo Hamilton, 1802-1871)

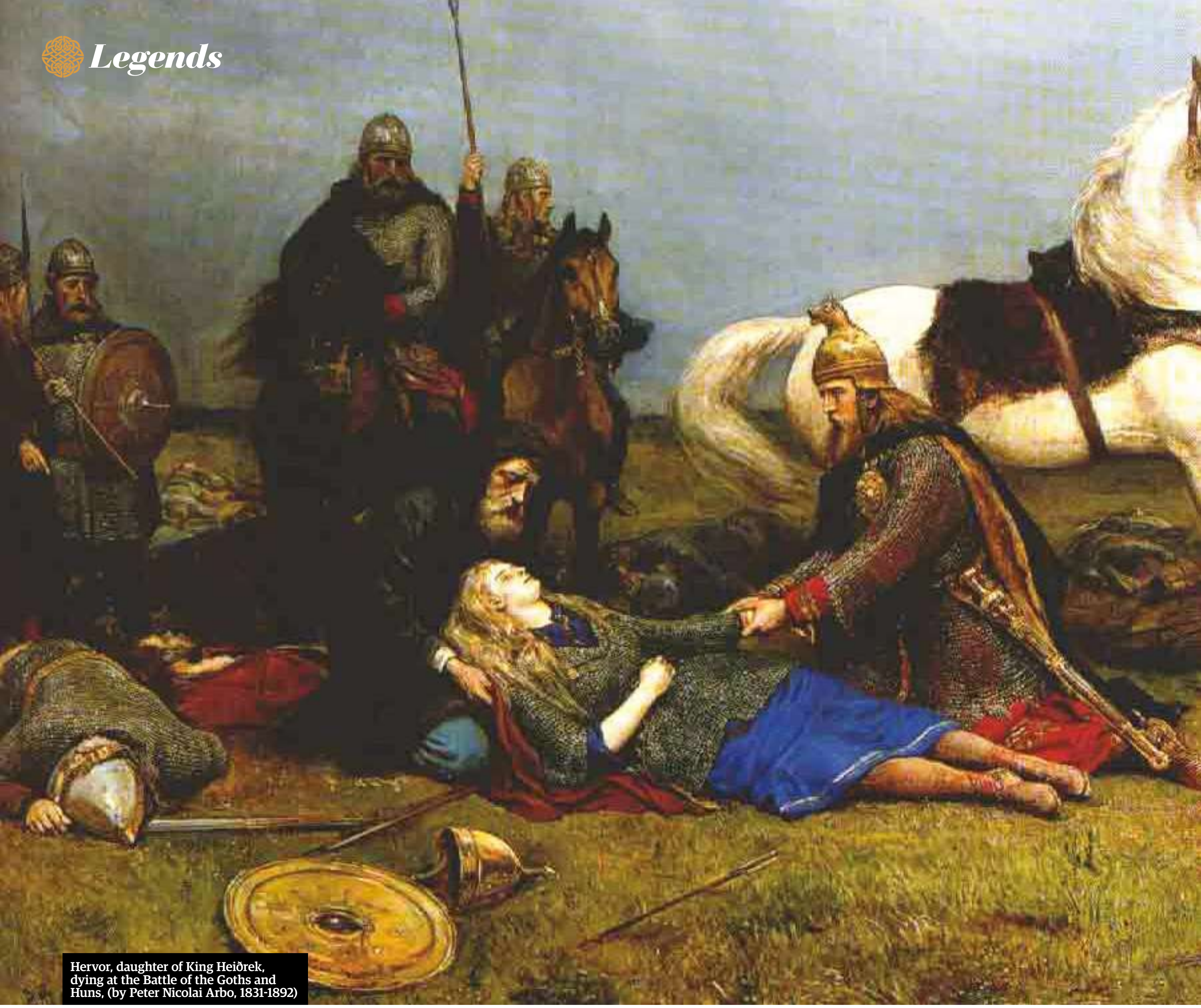
jarl for the hand of his daughter, Svafa, and they were married. Afterwards, Angantyr told the jarl about a dream in which he and his brother killed many birds on Samsey. Taking another path, two eagles flew towards them. Angantyr attacked one and they struggled, but both were on the ground before they stopped. His 11 brothers fought with the second eagle, and that appeared to beat them. The jarl said there was no point interpreting the dream, for it revealed the fall of mighty men.

"She asked her mother to equip her as carefully as a son, and left by herself"

Angantyr and his brothers went to Samsey. Seeing two ships in Munway cove, they assumed these belonged to Hjalmar and Orvar Odd the far-traveller. Drawing their swords and gnawing their shields with the berserk rage, six of them went onto each ship. But the men onboard were such tough warriors that they seized all their weapons and held fast, fearless. The berserkers went up one and down the other, slaying them all, then went raging along the shore.

Hjalmar and Orvar went up to the island to scout for the berserkers. As they were returning to their ships the berserkers left their vessels with bloody weapons, the rage having worn off, leaving them weak as if after a sickness. Orvar admitted to feeling scared when the 12 berserkers came yelling and roaring from the longships. Hjalmar asked him if he saw that all their men were killed, adding his sense that they would be Odin's guests in Valhalla that evening (the only words of fear he ever spoke.) Orvar proposed they escape to the forest, since the two of them would not match the 12 who had slaughtered twelve of Sweden's worthiest men. But Hjalmar preferred to stand and fight, seeing how Tyrfing was in Angantyr's hand, gleaming like the sun's rays. "Do you prefer to take on Angantyr alone, or all his brothers?" said Hjalmar. "I'll fight with Angantyr," replied Orvar, "he will give great strikes with Tyrfing and I trust my protective shirt more than yours." Hjalmar said, "When have you ever preceded me in battle? You just want the glory! I'm leading this duel, and I didn't promise the princess in Sweden to let anyone duel on my behalf. I'll fight Angantyr." He drew his sword and stepped up to Angantyr. The two wasted no time giving great strokes. Orvar baited the berserkers, then exchanged blows with Hjorvard. So smooth was Orvar's Irish silk shirt that no weapon could bite on it, and his sword cut into armour like cloth. Hjorvard died after a few blows. The same happened to Hervard, then Hrani, and so on. Orvar's fierce onslaught felled all 11 brothers. Hjalmar took 16 wounds and Angantyr fell dead. Almost blinded, Hjalmar died, and when Orvar told the king of Sweden about this, his daughter killed herself. Angantyr and his brothers were interred in a mound on Samsey with their weapons beside them.

Bjarmar's daughter, Svafa, gave birth to an exceptionally beautiful girl. She was named Hervor. Everyone advised leaving her outside, saying that if she took after her father's kin she would be unladylike. She was raised in the jarl's house and became as strong as a man. As soon as she became independent, she trained with the bow, shield and sword rather than sewing. She did more bad than good, and when it was forbidden to her she fled to the woods, killing and robbing men. The jarl brought her home, where she stayed after that.

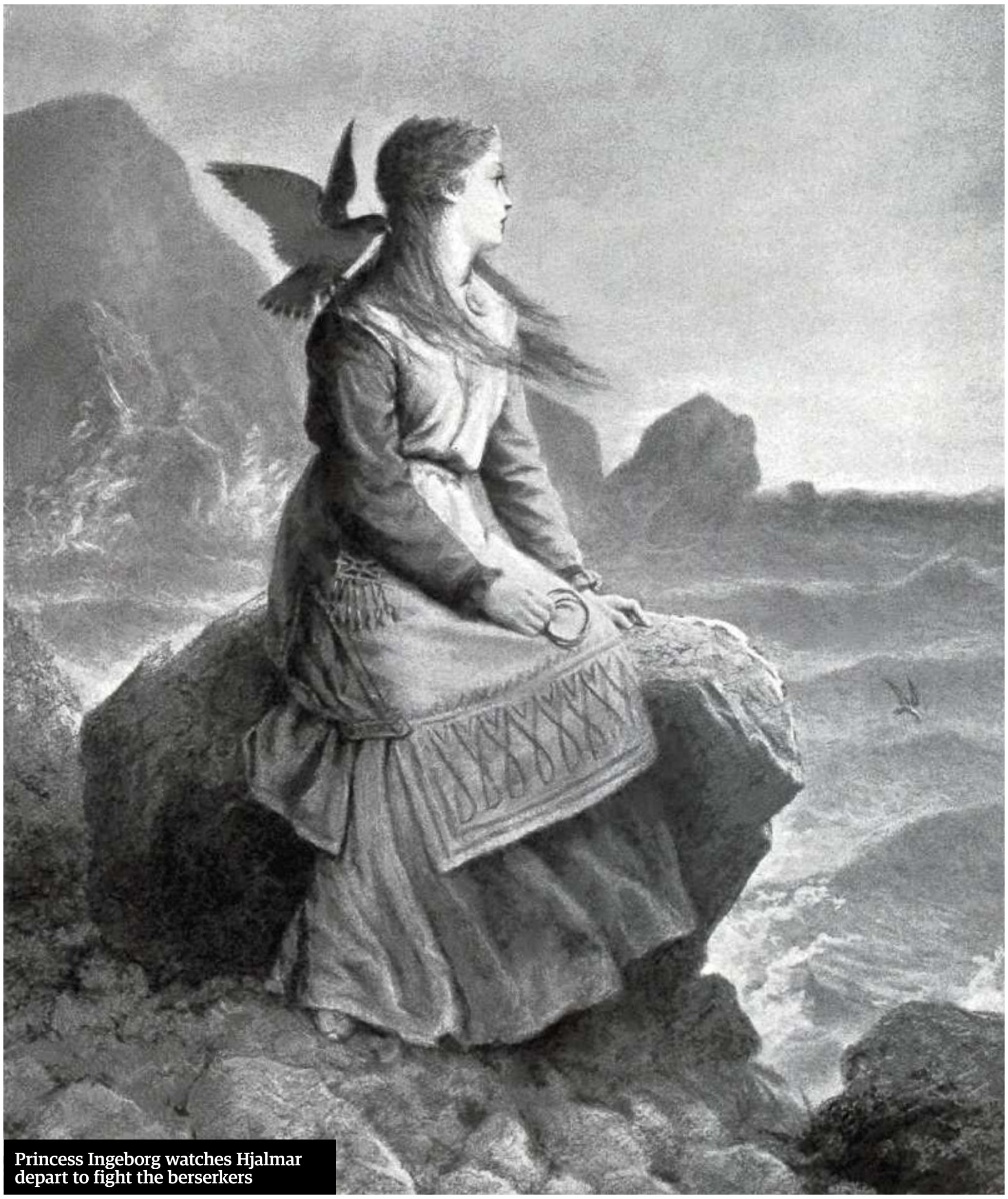


Hervor, daughter of King Heiðrek, dying at the Battle of the Goths and Huns, (by Peter Nicolai Arbo, 1831-1892)

Once, Hervor was near some slaves outside her home and she was abusing them, as she did everyone. One said to her, "All you want to do is evil, but evil's only to be expected from you. The jarl forbade you from talking about your parents because he's ashamed for you to know about that, since the lowest peasant slept with his daughter, producing you." A furious Hervor went to the jarl and said, "I can't glory in our noble name even though my mother found Frodmar's favour. I thought my father was a hero. Now I'm told he was a swineherd!" "You've heard a flimsy lie," the jarl replied, "Your father was held high among heroes. Angantyr's hall stands on south Samsey, sprinkled with earth." Hervor said, "Foster-father, I long to seek out my slain kinsmen. Surely they had a treasure. It will pass to me if I survive. I will bind up my hair with linen before I go. When I rise, much depends on a cloak and shirt being cut for me." She asked her mother to equip her as carefully as a son and left by herself, making her way to a place inhabited by Vikings, sailing with them for a while under the masculine name Hervard.

She soon became their captain, and when they came to Samsey island she told them to stop there, saying treasure was surely in the burial mound. The crewmen opposed this, saying evil creatures walked there constantly and that it was worse there in the day than most places are at night. But she prevailed and rowed ashore, landing in Munarvag at sunset. She met a herdsman who said, "Who among mortals comes to this island? Clear off quickly to your shelter!" She said, "I will not flee to shelter since I know no island folk. Before we turn back tell me where Hjorvald's mounds are." He said, "Don't ask me; you are unwise, friend of Vikings, you are badly lost. Let's flee as fast as feet allow – it's all evil for men out there." She said, "We'll not be afraid of such fires crackling, even though the island seethes with flame. These men are too insignificant to frighten us. Let's talk!" He said, "One who heads on alone in the dark night seems foolish. Fire is spreading, mounds are opening, burning field and fen – let's run faster!" He scarpered off back home.

Hervor saw the fire of the grave mounds and approached fearlessly, even though all the mounds were in her way. She entered these fires as if they were only fog until she came to the barrow of the berserkers, crying, "Arise, Angantyr! Hervor wakes you, Svafa's child, your only daughter. Give me the keen-edged sword from your crypt, the sword the dwarfs forged for King Sigrlami. Hervard, Hjorvard, Hrani, Angantyr! From the tree roots I arouse all of you with helmet and shirt, sharp weapon, harness and reddened spear. Arngrim's sons, evil men, have almost turned to dust, when none of Eyfur's sons will speak to me in Munarvag. Hervard, Hjorvard, Hrani, Angantyr, may it seem as if a mound of ants was in your ribcages if you don't relinquish Dvalin's sword. It doesn't befit the living dead to bear expensive weapons." Then Angantyr's corpse replied, "Why call me, daughter Hervor? Full of evil, you are heading to your doom. You're crazy, your



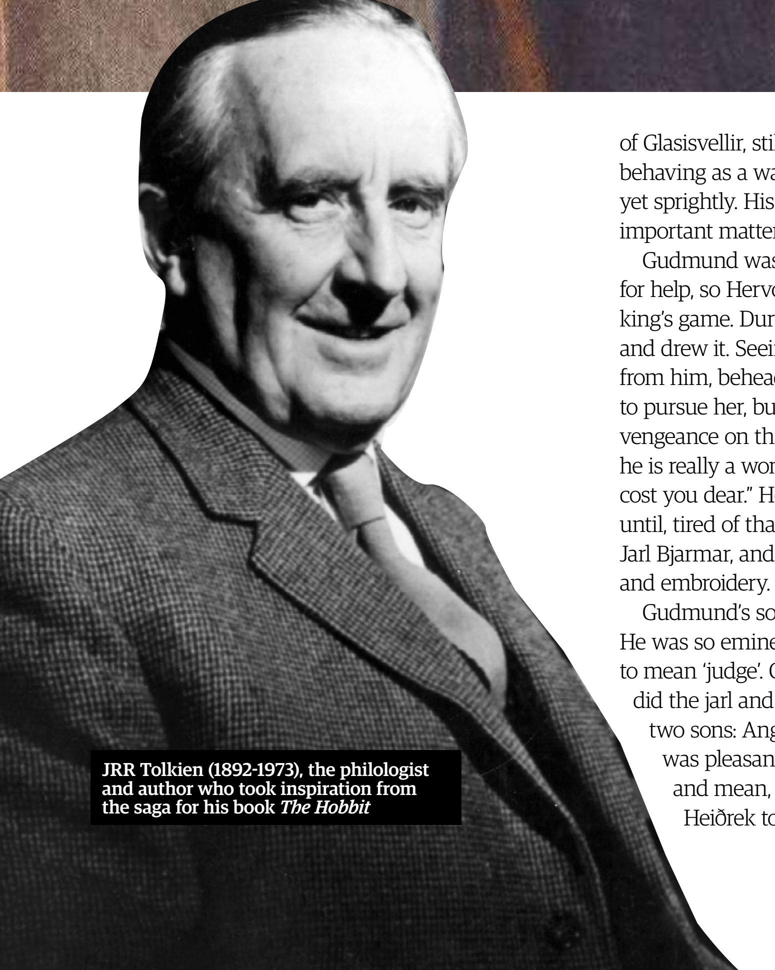
Princess Ingeborg watches Hjalmar depart to fight the berserkers

> "With Tyrfing he slashed at Odin, who transformed into a hawk and flew away"

mind darkened. Losing your wits, you stir the dead. No father or kinsman buried me. The two survivors, Hjalmar and Odd, kept Tyrfing, though one eventually wielded it." Hervor cried, "You lie to me! May only the god let you rest in your mound if you don't have Tyrfing with you. You're unwilling to give the heirloom to your only child."

Then the mound opened and it was as if the entire barrow was fire and flame. Angantyr said, "Hel's gate is raised and graves open; the island's border is ablaze; it's grim outside, look around you! Get to your ships now, girl, if you can!" She answered, "No bonfire that burns at night can frighten me. This maiden's spirit won't tremble even though she sees dead men standing in the grave-door." Angantyr then said, "I tell you what will be, Hervor – hear me out, wise daughter. The sword Tyrfing will curse all your offspring to their extinction. You'll bear a son who will fight with Tyrfing. He'll be called Heiðrek, the mightiest and most famous of all under heaven's tent." Hervor declared, "I seem to be a human woman before I decided to seek your hall. From out of your grave give me the sword that hates armour, dangerous to shields, the killer of Hjalmar." Angantyr said, "Hjalmar's killer lies beneath my shoulders, completely covered by flames. I know of no woman on earth who would dare to hold that sword between her hands." Hervor said, "I will keep the sharp sword and hold it if I can have it. I don't fear the burning fire, which seems to be dying." Angantyr said, "You're a fool, Hervor, but you're brave to rush into the fire with your eyes wide. I'll gladly give you the sword from my grave, maiden, I can't refuse." Hervor said, "You do well, kinsman, when you give me the sword from your grave. I value it more than the whole kingdom of Norway." Angantyr cried, "You don't understand! You're accursed in this matter, doomed woman. Tyrfing will destroy your family, girl, you'd better believe it." Hervor said, "I'll go to my ocean horses, this chief's daughter is cheerful. I don't care how my sons will clash later." Angantyr said, "It'll be yours and you'll long enjoy it. But keep Hjalmar's killer secret. Don't touch the edges, they're poisoned worse than plague. Farewell, daughter, I'd have given you 12 men's lives, all the power and strength that Arngrim's sons left after death." She said, "May you rest in the grave, I must go. It seems I'm between worlds when fires burn all around me."

She went to the ships. When dawn came it seemed that the ships were gone, and that the Vikings had run scared when they heard the thunders and fires on the island. She eventually got away from Samsey, and went to King Gudmund



JRR Tolkien (1892-1973), the philologist and author who took inspiration from the saga for his book *The Hobbit*

of Glasisvellir, still calling herself Hervard and behaving as a warrior. Gudmund was very old, and yet sprightly. His son Hofund participated in all the important matters.

Gudmund was losing at chess one day. He asked for help, so Hervor got up and advised, improving the king's game. During this, a man picked up Tyrfing and drew it. Seeing this, Hervard grabbed the sword from him, beheaded him and left. The men wanted to pursue her, but the king dissuaded them. "Your vengeance on this man will seem smaller because he is really a woman. The weapon she yields will cost you dear." Hervor went raiding with the Vikings until, tired of that, she returned to her foster-father, Jarl Bjarmar, and quietly settled down to her weaving and embroidery.

Gudmund's son, Hofund, wished to marry Hervor. He was so eminently wise and just, his name came to mean 'judge'. Gudmund agreed to the union, as did the jarl and Hervor. So they married and had two sons: Angantyr, then Heiðrek. The former was pleasant and popular; the latter was surly and mean, yet Hervor loved him best. She sent Heiðrek to wise Gizur for fostering.

One time, Hofund had a feast at which surly, drunken Heiðrek started quarrelling with men behind Angantyr's back. He punched one of them and goaded the man to avenge himself. Angantyr tried to cool things down, but when his back was turned again, Heiðrek riled the man so much that he jumped up and killed the man next to him. Hofund ordered Heiðrek to leave, and as Heiðrek walked away from the hall he got a big stone and threw it towards the men talking in the dark. Returning, he found a dead man: his brother Angantyr. He confessed to his parents, who both agreed to banish him, yet Queen Hervor begged her husband to advise Heiðrek. With heavy misgivings, the king told Heiðrek to never help a man who has killed his superior, nor to help a man who has murdered his friend. He must not let his wife visit her family often, even if she begs. He must not stay out late with his mistress. Nor ride his best horse in a hurry. Finally, he must never foster the son of a man more noble than himself. Heiðrek called this advice cynical, then left, followed by his mother. Beyond the courtyard, she said to him, "You've messed up so badly you can't expect to return. I can barely help you. Take this gold

Not only was Heiðrek cursed by the sword, he was also cursed by the god Odin, for attacking him with Tyrfing

and this sword, Tyrfing. It belonged to Angantyr the berserker, your grandfather. Everyone's heard of him. In a fight always remember how Tyrfing has been victorious." They exchanged farewells and parted.

Shortly after, Heiðrek met some men escorting a criminal who had betrayed his lord. Heiðrek offered them half his gold as ransom, and they released the man. Heiðrek refused the man's pledge of service, claiming he would be no more faithful to a stranger if he had betrayed his own lord. Afterwards, Heiðrek again gave his gold to ransom a criminal, and again refused the man's allegiance.

Far away from there, Heiðrek entered Jutland, ruled by old King Harald. Harald's rule was undermined by certain jarls that had defeated him and demanded an annual tribute. Heiðrek stayed the winter with Harald. When a huge quantity of goods arrived, the king admitted he had to pay them as tribute. Heiðrek persuaded the king to raise a great army, and led Harald's forces, wielding Tyrfing in his right hand. He slew everyone near him, even charging into the opposing ranks and killing several jarls. The triumphant Heiðrek then married Harald's daughter, Helga, and they had a son called Angantyr.

> "Why call me, daughter Hervor? Full of evil, you are heading to your doom"

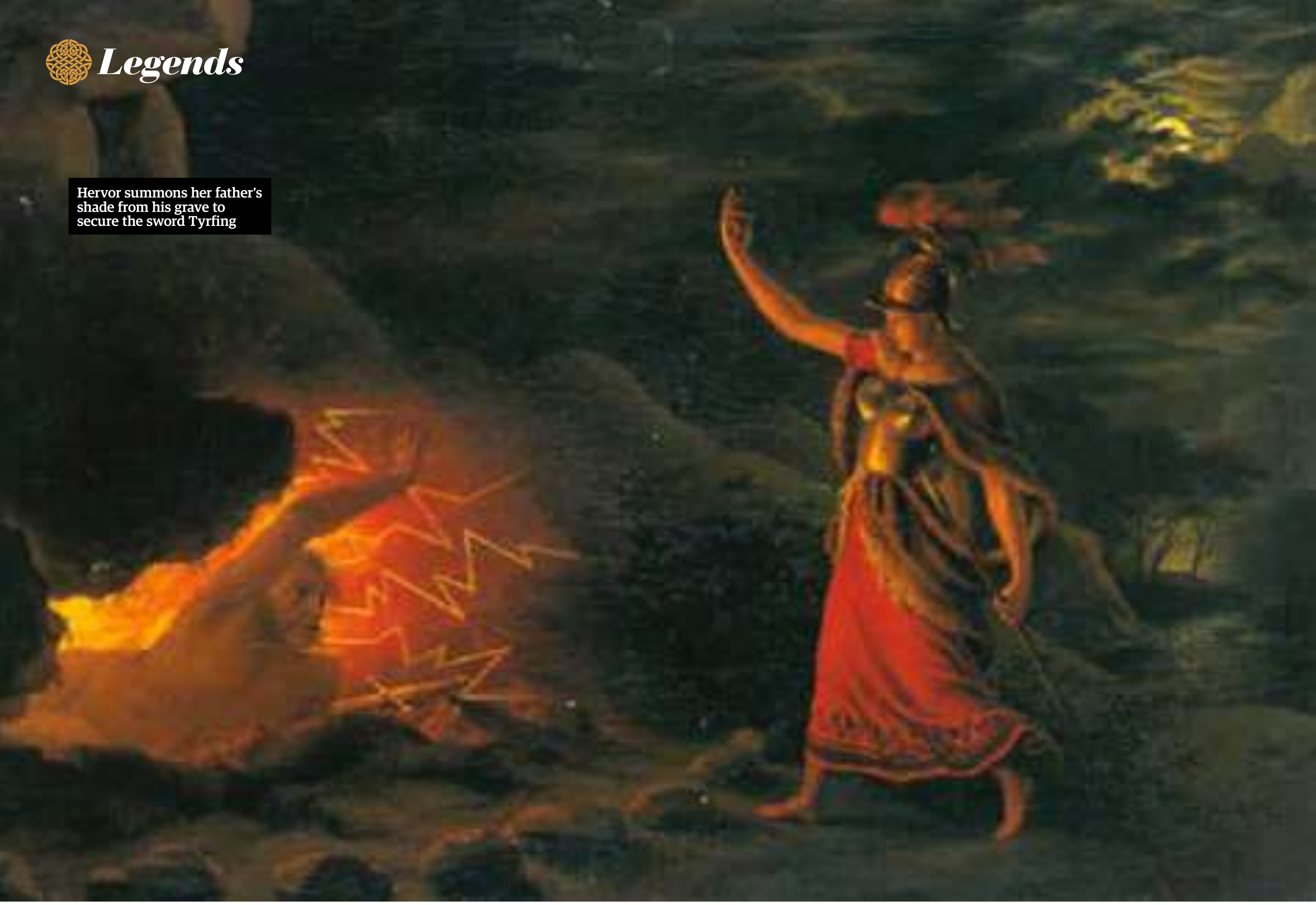
A terrible famine turned Jutland into a wasteland. The shamans pronounced that plenty could return only by sacrificing the most noble youth. Harald declared that person was Heiðrek's son, while Heiðrek said it was Harald's son. To resolve the matter, Heiðrek went to see his father, Hofund, who decided that Heiðrek's son was the most noble person. Heiðrek asked what compensation he would get for losing his son. Hofund said that the sacrifice was off unless every fourth man present at the sacrifice accepted Heiðrek's command. Back in Jutland, the council agreed to this, boosting Heiðrek's following. Heiðrek then attacked Harald, killing him and claiming the kingdom. Instead of his son, he gave the slain army to Odin. His wife was so angry about her father's death that she hanged herself in the goddess' shrine.

One summer King Heiðrek took his army south to Hunland, defeated King Humli, and captured his daughter, Sifka. He sent her back next summer with their boy, Hlod, who was raised by Humli, his mother's father. Another summer he went to Saxony where the welcoming king offered him any of his lands. Heiðrek married the king's daughter, doubling the feast, and went home with countless treasures. Now a great warrior, King Heiðrek allowed his wife and her stepson Angantyr to visit her father.

One summer Heiðrek sneaked into the king's hall in Saxonland and found a golden-haired man sleeping next to his wife. He cut a lock of the man's hair, then went to his ships with Angantyr. Next morning he learned that Angantyr had suddenly died. Demanding to see the body, he was shown a dog wrapped in a shroud. "My son has changed for the worse if he's turned into a dog," he said. At the council, Heiðrek claimed to have evidence of the queen's treachery. A search for the golden-haired man found him in the kitchen. "See who the princess prefers to me", said Heiðrek. He matched the lock to the man's hair. "You've always been fair with us," he added, "so your kingdom will have peace. But I don't want your daughter anymore." Then Heiðrek went home with his son.

Heiðrek now intended to disobey his father's advice, so he invited the son of King Gardariki to be fostered with him. Gardariki refused, but the queen prevailed, so Heiðrek received the boy and loved him, as did Sifka, Humli's daughter. During the feast the kings went hunting in the forest with dogs and hawks. When they were alone Heiðrek told the prince to hide himself at a farm. The boy reluctantly agreed. That evening in bed, Sifka asked Heiðrek why he seemed so unhappy. "The king's son asked for an apple growing high on a tree," he said, "so I drew Tyrfing to cut it down before remembering its deadly curse upon being drawn. Then I killed the boy." The next day, Sifka told this to the king and queen. The king and Sifka wanted Heiðrek executed, yet Heiðrek was so popular that no one would do it. Then two men (the pair Heiðrek had saved) stood up in the hall and shackled the king. The queen wanted the king to be reconciled with Heiðrek, yet he would not accept possessions, only the king's daughter, who he took home. To rid himself of Sifka he took her away on his

A 6th century Swedish plaque depicting berserkers



Hervor summons her father's shade from his grave to secure the sword Tyrfing

best horse. At a river she became too heavy for the horse, killing it. He had to carry her, but the river was so strong he flung her off his shoulders, breaking her back. She drifted downstream, dead. Heiðrek arranged a feast and married Gardariki's daughter. Their daughter, another Hervor, was a warrior; she was raised in England with Jarl Frodmar.

Secure in his kingdom, Heiðrek became a great and wise chieftain. He had a great boar nurtured, one as big as a bull. Laying his hands on its head and golden bristles, he swore that everyone, however wrong, would have justice from his chieftains, or else the accused should present riddles that the king could not solve. This earned Heiðrek many friends.

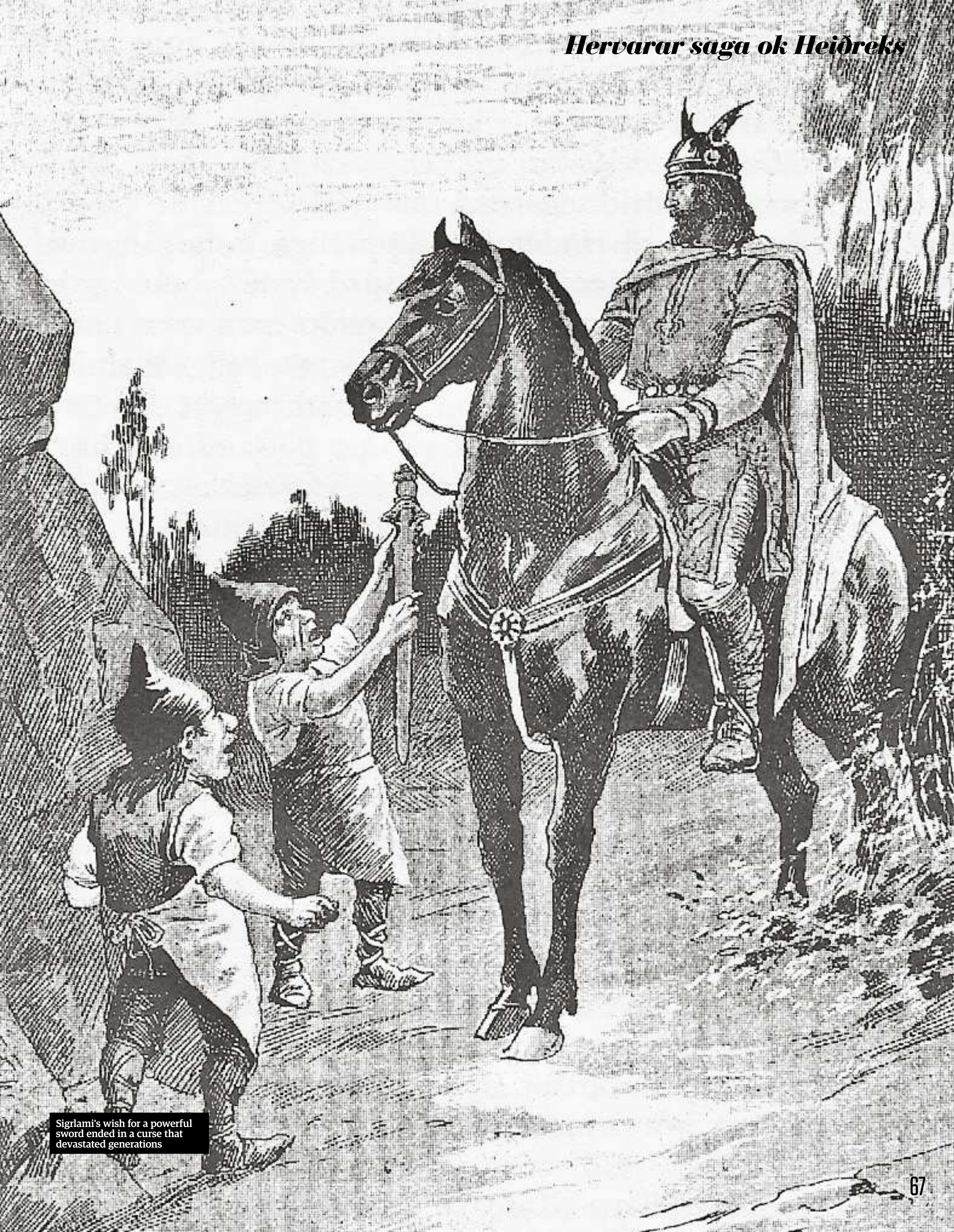
King Heiðrek asked a powerful enemy called Gestumblindi to come and be reconciled with him. Dreading a reckoning for his crimes, Gestumblindi sacrificed to Odin for help. A stranger calling himself Gestumblindi came to his door, saying they should change clothes, which they did. Then Gestumblindi hid away. Next day, the imposter Gestumblindi went to the king for reconciliation. Rather than accepting the judgment of wise men, Gestumblindi chose to ask riddles. The king accepted, so Gestumblindi said, "I want what I had yesterday, find it out. It spoils mankind, hinders yet inspires speech. Guess this riddle, King Heiðrek." "Good riddle," said the king. "Fetch him ale. It spoils many mens wits, and makes many talkative. With some it entangles their tongues, preventing speech." Gestumblindi then said, "I left home and saw a way of ways; a way was under and over it, and on all sides." The king said, "You went across a bridge on a river; its way was under you. Birds flew over and around you, that was their ways." Gestumblindi said, "What drink did I drink yesterday? Not wine, nor water. Not ale, nor food. Yet it quenched me." "Good riddle," said the king, "the answer is dew from the grass." Gestumblindi said, "What shrill one rides a hard road and has been that way before? He kisses hard with two mouths, yet only on gold." The king replied, "It's a hammer for working gold."

This sabre owned by Karl XV of Sweden is named for the legendary Tyrfing

Gestumblindi said, "Harder than horn, blacker than raven, whiter than egg-white, straighter than a spear-shaft." The king said, "It's obsidian, shining with a sunbeam." The king guessed many other riddles correctly, until Gestumblindi finally asked, "What did Odin say in Baldr's ear before he was raised on the pyre?" Heiðrek cried, "Only you know that, monster!" and with Tyrfing he slashed at Odin, who transformed into a hawk and flew away. The king lopped off his tail-feathers, which is why the hawk has a short-tail ever since. For trying to kill him, Odin cursed Heiðrek to be killed by slaves.

One night nine slaves captured by King Heiðrek during raids in the west got weapons and went to his lodgings. They killed everyone, including Heiðrek, pillaging the sword Tyrfing and all the treasure. Angantyr swore to avenge his father, searching extensively for these men by himself. One evening he was walking to the sea beside the River Grafa and saw three fishermen. One fisherman used a sword to behead a fish whilst chanting a verse referring to Heiðrek's death. Noticing cursed Tyrfing, Angantyr waited until midnight then knocked known the fisherman's tent, killing all nine slaves, and took Tyrfing as a sign that his father was avenged.

Hlod learned of his father's death and the investiture of his half-brother Angantyr. With the



Sigrlami's wish for a powerful sword ended in a curse that devastated generations blessing of King Humli (his foster-father in Hunland) Hlod went to Angantyr in Arnheimar, Ukraine, to demand a birthright of half of his father's riches, including Mirkwood forest and the sacred tombs on the banks of the Dnieper. Angantyr offered him treasures, slaves, and a third of Gothland. Heiðrek's foster-father, Gizur, thought this was too generous for the bastard son of a slave girl, giving offence to Hlod who returned to Hunland. He and Humli planned to muster an army, including 12-year-olds and foals. With the next spring thaw, their army, around 30, 000 strong marched through Mirkwood to the level plains of Gothland where Angantyr's sister, Hervor, commanded a defensive Goth stronghold with her foster-father, Ormar. At sunrise, Hervor saw a dust cloud from horse riders, then the glittering armour of the Hunnish army. Led by Ormar and Hervor, the garrison rode out and a mighty battle began. Outnumbered by the Huns, Hervor's army was decimated, and Hervor fell too.

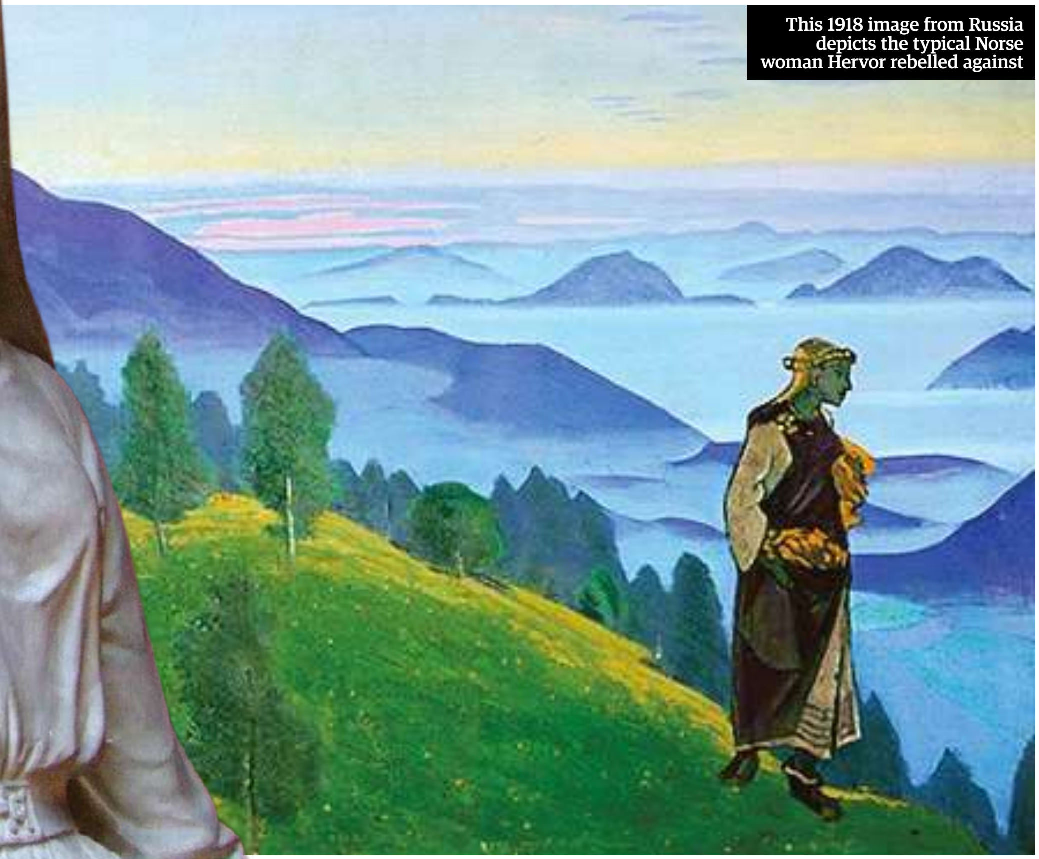
As the Huns ravaged the lands, Ormar fled to give the bad news to Angantyr. Angantyr commanded Gizur to fight the Huns on the Danube Heath, summoning every man who could bear arms. The battle raged for eight days as men thronged to Angantyr's side by day and night, stemming his losses.

"Led by Ormar and Hervor, the garrison rode out and a mighty battle began"

The Huns were ferocious but the Goths stood firm, defending their freedom and fatherland. They broke through the Hun legions, letting Angantyr charge forward, cutting down men and horses with Tyrfing. The Hun ranks fell apart and Hlod and King Humli were slain. The Goths cut down the fleeing Huns, choking and diverting rivers with dead men and steeds, and filling valleys with them. King Angantyr found his dying brother Hlod. "I offered you infinite riches," he said, "but for the sake of war you have won nothing. We are cursed, brother, I'm your killer. Never forget the Fates' doom is evil." Angantyr reined long in Jutland and spawned lines of great kings. His great-great grandson, Ivar the Wide-Grasping, conquered all of Sweden, along with Denmark, Latvia, Saxony, Estonia, and Northumbria in England.

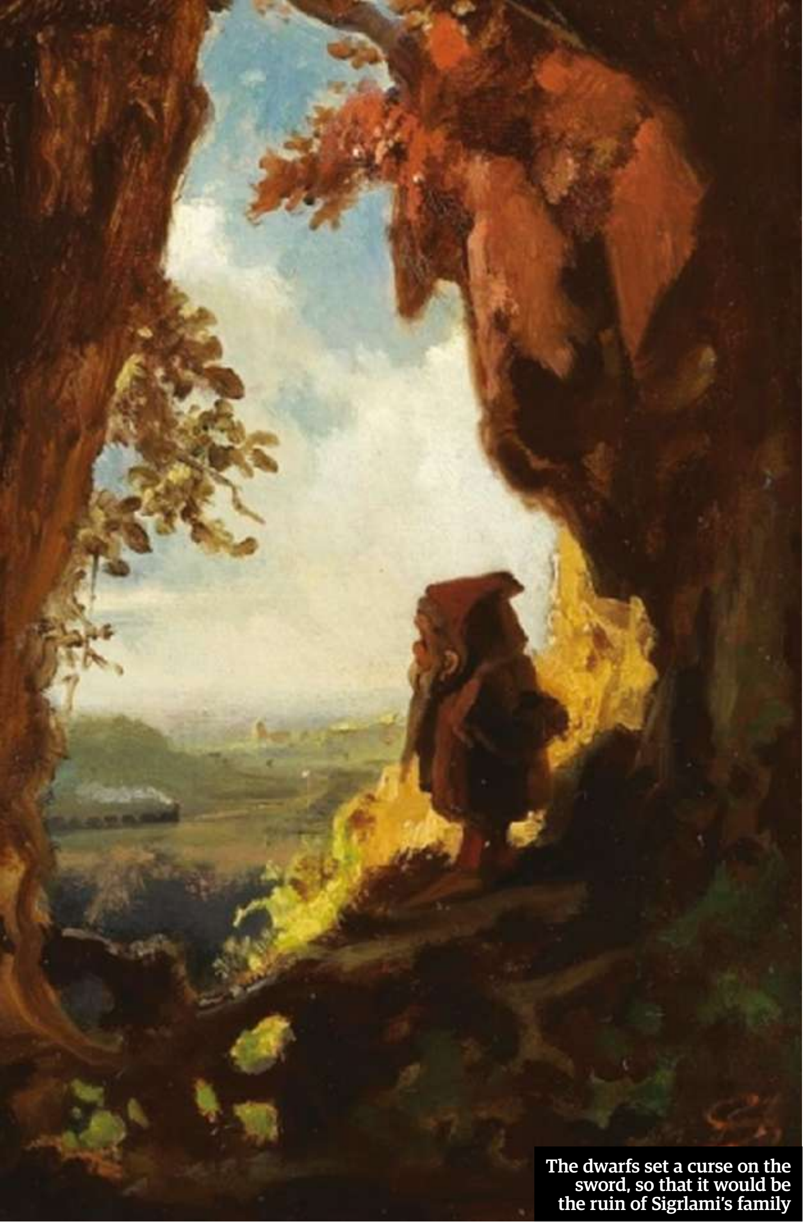
It all begins with the wielding of a sword. But why not an axe; are these not Vikings? The popular view of Vikings wielding axes is not upheld by their sagas, esteeming swords most highly instead. Viking swords like Tyrfing were surprisingly rare and extremely expensive to own in reality. Their skillful forging involved heating iron bars (often from different smelters) then folding and twisting them together, and welding them to produce a strong, flexible blade with rippling or chevron patterns. The handles could have intricate decorations of precious metals, the more expensive to denote the status of the owner. Swords typically had two edges that came to a rounded end, which was stronger than a sharp point (and they were usually wielded single-handed). As in the saga, swords had names and were passed down as heirlooms. Real sword names include 'Leg-biter', 'Fierce', 'Cutter', and the personal names of the bladesmiths, whose extreme skill imbued them and their weapons with an aura of mystery and magic. The meaning of the name Tyrfing is obscure but may relate to the Tervingi, forest dwellers who lived on the Danubian plain in the 3rd and 4th centuries, a few decades before the time when the battle between Goths and Huns that is featured at the end of the saga might have actually occurred.

The episode on Samsey island when Hjalmar and Orvar admit their fear of Arngrim's berserker sons clarifies what many must have felt when facing these infamous warriors. We hear of their "berserk-frenzy", howling and furiously gnawing the rims of their shields (also seen on the 12th century Lewis chessmen). Their name could stem from "bear shirt", as they preferred bearskin to ordinary armour. Their warrior cult, seeing themselves as more bear than human, has ancient shamanic overtones. A key part of this may have been taking hallucinogenic mushrooms (perhaps mixed with alcohol) to amplify their courage and strength: the berserk rage. The tiredness they feel after literally going berserk supports this hypothesis.

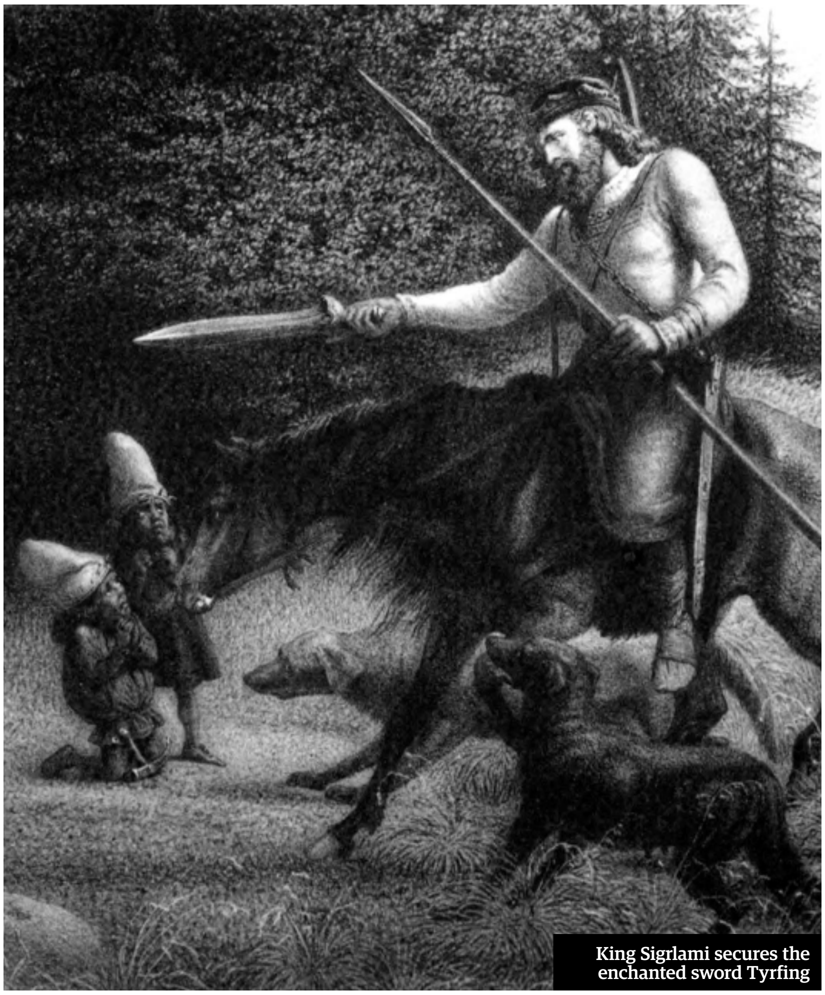


This 1918 image from Russia depicts the typical Norse woman Hervor rebelled against

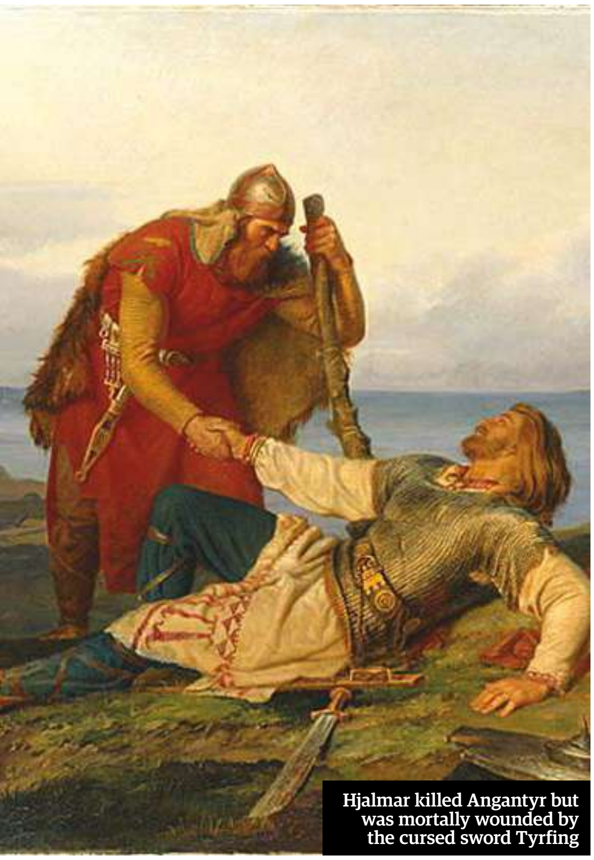
Ingeborg fell dead on learning that Hjalmar had been killed in battle



The dwarfs set a curse on the sword, so that it would be the ruin of Sigrlami's family



King Sigrlami secures the enchanted sword Tyrfing



Hjalmar killed Angantyr but was mortally wounded by the cursed sword Tyrfing

The character of Hervor in her role as a shield-maiden (skjaldmaer) is known from other Norse sagas too, but what of actual history? For decades, the prevailing view was that such women were legendary, until scientific analysis of the Birka female Viking warrior grave from 10th century Sweden, with her two shields, sword, axe, spear, arrows and battle-knife, confirmed her identity and status, and validated early medieval accounts from eastern Europe of finding dead female warriors amongst males. Shield-maidens are now a staple of fantasy fiction and games, from Eowyn in *The Lord of the Rings* to Brienne of Tarth in *Game of Thrones*.

The riddles posed by the god Odin in the guise of Gestumblindi are unique, not only in ancient Norse, but in the literature of any other country (with a couple of exceptions). Not even the Bible is referenced. Around 40 riddles are asked in the full version, mostly inspired by the natural world. They were an influence on JRR Tolkien's fantasy novel *The Hobbit*, which borrowed one answered by King Heiðrek. Tolkien also adapted the dwarf name Dvalin for Dwalin, one of his 'dwarves'. Another influence was Hervor, prefiguring the *The Lord of the Rings*' warrior Eowyn, and the battle between the Goths and Huns, as well as the ancient forest Mirkwood that sets the stage for the finale.

The climactic battle of the Goths versus the Huns is probably the oldest part of the saga. Claims about its real historical inspiration include a battle between forces led by Attila the Hun and the Roman patrician Aetius, helped by Visigoths, on the Carpathian Plains in 451. Another theory says it reflects clashes between the Goths and the Huns following Attila's death, such as the Battle of Nedao of 454, fought on an unidentified river in Pannonia (a division of the Roman Empire between western Hungary and northern Bosnia and Herzegovina). Another school puts Hervor and Angantyr in the Lombardic dynasty of King Agelmundus (circa 360-400), all of whom are mentioned in the old English poem *Widsith*. The problem with nailing the battle's date and location is that its only true historical aspects are topographic names that match the geography of the Gotish Ukraine during the Migration Period, when Germanic, Hunnic and Slavic "barbarians" moved into territory occupied by the collapsing Roman Empire from the end of the 4th century. If the episode does reflect one or more events from this era, it is an incredible feat of storytelling, spanning almost 1000 years between the experience and the writing of it. The existence of the saga is even more impressive than the deeds it describes, squeezing hundreds of years of half-remembered fact and fiction into a mini-epic. But perhaps the most important thing to take away here is that two of the most important main characters of the saga are complex, non-archetypal warriors – and women.

© Getty; Alamy; Rob Roy

Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar

THORSTEIN, VIKING'S SON

The colourful saga of Thorstein starts with a tragic boyhood argument and is filled with magic, trolls, curses and mystery

Written by Catherine Curzon

The saga of Thorstein, Viking's Son, is not one of the most famous sagas of the Norse lands. Icelandic Thorstein doesn't quite enjoy the popularity of his more celebrated or infamous contemporaries. However, this prequel story to The Saga of Fridthjof the Bold is full of intrigue and thrills and takes its title character and the reader on a roller coaster journey into revenge, magic and mercy!

The saga begins in 7th century Norway where Jarl Viking, the regal descendent of a legendary race of giants, is raising his nine sons into model Norsemen. The eldest of these sons was Thorstein, who takes the leading role in the saga that bears his name. In a neighbouring territory Viking's peer, Njorfe, King of Uplands, is raising nine boys of his own.

The mountain range that divided the kingdoms of Njorfe and Viking had done much to keep the peace between the two men, who had long since enjoyed a friendly rivalry but, as chieftains and experienced warriors, they had also learned to live in peace. Inevitably with eighteen boys growing up in neighbouring lands, as the sons of Njorfe and Viking grew, they too became determined to uphold their family pride. In their neighbouring kingdoms the sons shared the same friendly rivalry that fired the friendship of Njorfe and Viking but by the time the boys were reaching early adulthood, two stood out.

In Viking's family it was Thorstein who embodied all that Norsemen should be. Strong, wise despite his youth and honourable, he was a son to be proud of. Yet there was one who could not only match but beat Thorstein. That was Njorfe's hot-tempered eldest son, Jokul, and he had emerged as the leader of the pack.

One day, the eighteen boys divided themselves up into family teams to play a game of ball. With Thorstein now 20, Viking warned him to check his considerable strength and ensure that neither Jokul nor the other boys suffer any injury. Even with this warning, the game was hard-fought and Thorer, one of Thorstein's brothers, became ever more frustrated by the antics of Jokul's brother, Olaf, who he was marking. Thorer and Olaf's boyish quarrel exploded into a fight and Olaf gave Thorer a violent blow on the head, at which point Thorstein jumped between the boys and broke up the brawl.

When the game ended and the two teams went home to their kingdoms, Thorer couldn't help but dwell on the blow that Olaf had landed on him. The more he thought, the angrier he became, until he stole into Njorfe's home. There he sought out Olaf and fatally stabbed him with a spear in retaliation.

Horrified at his son's actions and fearful of revenge attacks, Viking exiled Thorer to an island in Lake Vänern. Thorstein, armed with a legendary blade named Angervadil, elected to join Thorer in exile with two of their brothers, hoping they might be able to return home when the heat died down. One man was not satisfied and Jokul, consumed with rage, swore revenge on Thorer, no matter what.

With the fire of vengeance ignited in his blood, Jokul begged his father to declare war on Viking but Njorfe refused to do so, declaring that he wouldn't wage war on a friend for the sake of a personal fight

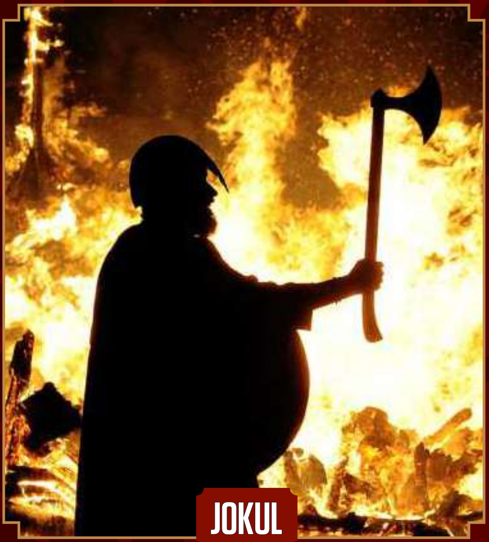
Thorstein's ship, Ellide, is also mentioned in Frithjof's saga as one of the family treasures

FOLK HEROES

Archetypal characters and fairytale tropes

THORSTEIN

Thorstein, the titular hero of the saga, was the kind of man you'd want at your side. He was the son of Viking, the celebrated Norse ruler, and the eldest of nine boys. His name, which translates as Thor's Stone, is a good indication of just how reliable a fellow he was. His marriage has parallels with the Arthurian tale of *The Wedding of Sir Gawaine and Dame Ragnelle*, which takes place in a forest called Inglewood.

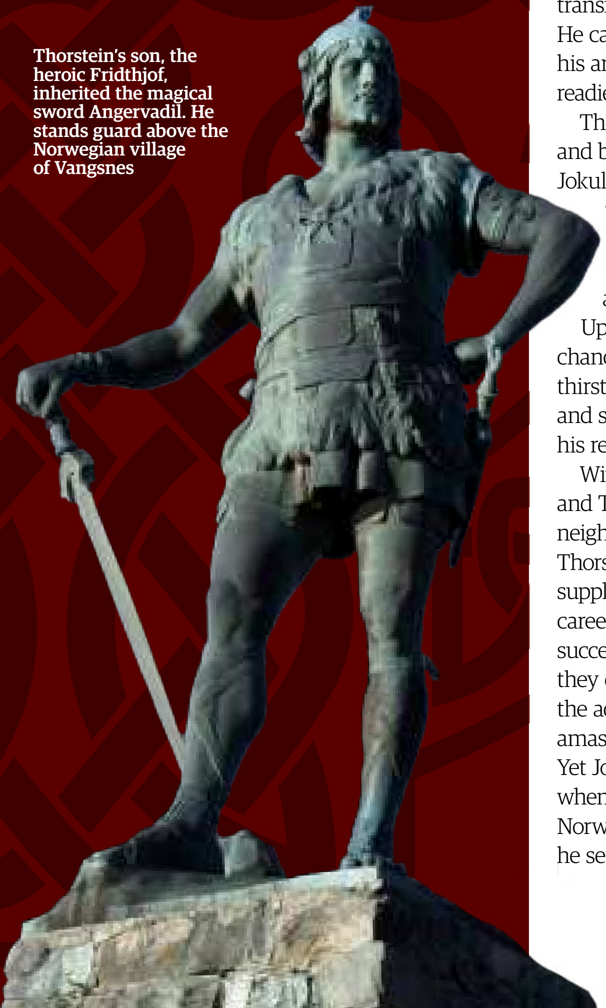


JOKUL

Jokul was Thorstein's opposite number and boyhood best friend. He too was the eldest of nine sons by his father, Njorfe, Viking's fellow ruler. When Jokul's brother was killed by Thorstein's sibling, Jokul swore revenge and devoted his life to wiping out the surviving sons of Viking. Aided by sorcery, Jokul was a fierce warrior but his single-minded pursuit of Thorstein clouded his judgement and cost him his hand.

INGEBORG

Ingeborg was the beautiful, wealthy and sensitive sister of Beli, heir to the kingdom of Sogn. When her lands were invaded by Jokul, Ingeborg was given a choice between a forced marriage to the sorcerer, Ogautan, or an enchantment that would turn her into a troll until a noble man freely offered to marry her. She chose the latter. The curse was lifted by Thorstein.



Thorstein's son, the heroic Fridthjof, inherited the magical sword Angervadil. He stands guard above the Norwegian village of Vangsnes

between impetuous boys. Left alone to seethe, Jokul became ever more determined to avenge the death of his late brother.

Learning of Thorer's hiding place from a sorcerer, Ogautan, Jokul travelled to the banks of the lake. With him he carried a weather-belg, a magical pouch of animal skin that gave the bearer the ability to control the weather. With one shake of the weather-belg, the waters of the lake froze solid and Njorfe's sons were able to simply walk across to the island, where they fell upon Thorer and his three loyal brothers. Though Thorer and Thorstein survived the bloody clash that followed, their two brothers were killed. Thorstein sustained terrible injuries and Jokul, believing himself avenged and the brothers dead, fled the island with his surviving supporters.

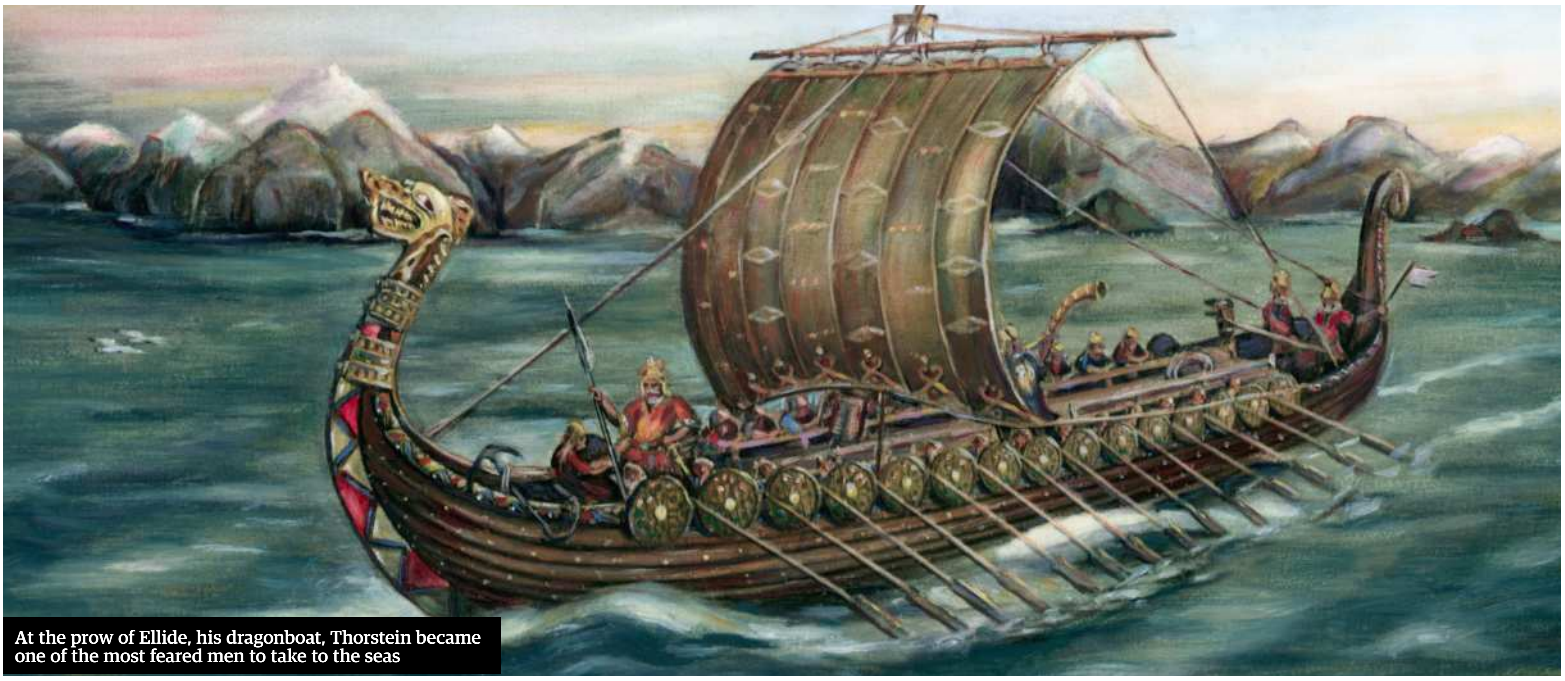
When he learned of what had happened, Viking hurried to the island and searched for his wounded sons. He carried them home and concealed them in an underground chamber, where they were nursed back to health. Viking warned his sons that they could never again leave their subterranean hiding place, for if they did Ogautan would be sure to hear of it and lead Jokul to them. Thorstein, as wise and well behaved as ever, was happy to comply. The hotheaded Thorer, however, was less obedient and as his health returned and the weather grew fine, he pined for the outside world.

Fearing for what might happen if Thorer went out alone, Thorstein reluctantly agreed to accompany him for a walk in the forest beyond their sanctuary. As they strolled together the brothers encountered a vixen and realised too late that their father was right. The vixen was actually Ogautan, who had transformed into an animal to find their hiding place. He carried the news back to Jokul, who mustered his army and prepared to attack. Viking, meanwhile, readied his soldiers to meet fire with fire.

The battle between the two groups was fierce and bloody but ultimately, Viking's forces prevailed. Jokul fled the scene and abandoned his men to whatever fate Viking decided but the wise chief showed them mercy. He sent the soldiers back to Njorfe's kingdom with gifts, greetings and assurances that there would be no reprisals.

Upon receiving them, Njorfe gave his son one last chance, warning Jokul that he must set aside his thirst for vengeance. The impetuous Jokul refused and swore that he would never rest until Viking and his remaining sons were dead.

With no hope of peace, Viking sent Thorstein and Thorer to the court of Halfdan, who ruled the neighbouring kingdom of Vags. Halfdan recognised Thorstein as a man of integrity and strength, and supplied him with a ship so that he might begin his career as a raider. Thorstein and Thorer soon found success on the seas, winning fortune and fame as they did so. Though Thorer married and retired from the adventuring life, Thorstein continued his career, amassing enormous wealth as the years passed. Yet Jokul hadn't forgotten his vow of vengeance and when he heard that Thorstein had settled in Sogn, a Norwegian land under the control of Halfdan's allies, he seized the change to finish off his old enemy.



At the prow of Ellide, his dragonboat, Thorstein became one of the most feared men to take to the seas

Jokul invaded Sogn. He murdered the king, chased his heir, Beli, from the kingdom and transformed Beli's sister, Ingeborg, into a troll. The woman would return to human form only if a nobleman agreed to become her husband, something that Jokul was certain no man would ever do. Finally, he conjured up a tempest that left Thorstein shipwrecked, and, certain his foe was dead, sailed home.

Yet Thorstein wasn't dead. With his remaining strength he swam for shore but his injuries had left him weak and as he felt himself drowning, he saw a hideous female troll emerge from the surf. She carried Thorstein to safety and introduced herself as Skellinefja, promising that she would save his life if he would promise to grant her an as yet unspoken wish. Thorstein accepted the bargain and once he was healed, was reunited with his brother, Thorer.

Hearing of Thorstein's return, Jokul attacked the brothers again. In the battle, both Ogautan and Thorer were killed. Having single-handedly vanquished most of Jokul's soldiers and lost the sword Angervadil to the raging waters of a river, the mortally wounded Thorstein was left to die. Luckily, Skellinefja, the troll, came to his aid again and not only returned Angervadil, but nursed Thorstein back to health. When he asked what favour he could do in return, she replied that she wished to be his wife. Thorstein agreed, grateful for her aid and friendship.

Only now was Skellinefja able to share her secret. She told Thorstein that she had once been the beautiful Ingeborg and a curse had transformed her into a troll. Now the curse was broken and she was once again a beautiful princess, not to mention one with a hefty dowry. Fired up by his love, Thorstein returned Beli to the throne of Sogn and married Ingeborg, who became the mother of his children.

Thorstein and Beli took to the seas once more aboard Ellide, a magnificent flagship captured following a brutal underwater battle with a fearsome viking named Otunfaxe who was more monster than man. Yet Jokul never gave up his tireless pursuit and when the two men fought a bloody final battle, Thorstein succeeded in severing his foe's hand. Though Thorstein was captured, he escaped and returned home to a hero's welcome. Jokul, meanwhile, had nothing to show for his loss but the nickname, Jokul the One-Handed.

> "The impetuous Jokul swore that he would never rest until Viking and his sons were dead"

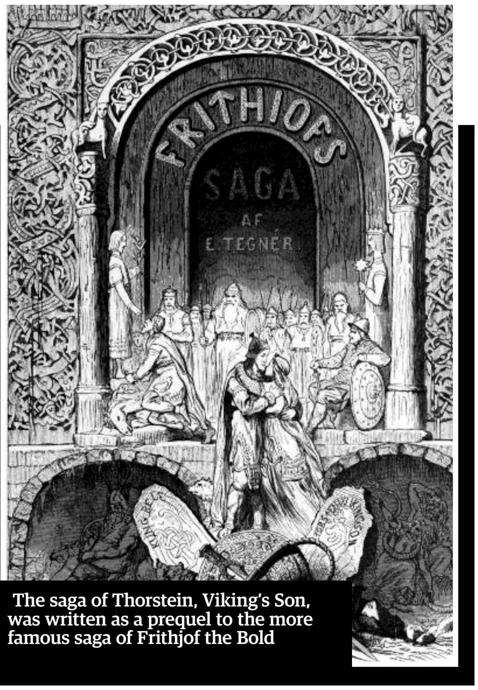
Thorstein, however, had inherited his father's sense of honour. He offered Jokul a truce and extensive lands by way of apology for the loss of his hand. The men were reconciled and Thorstein ruled as one of the most celebrated leaders people had ever known.

Thorstein's is a moral tale with plenty of lessons for the reader. This saga is one of honour and dignity and perhaps most importantly, of forgiveness. Pursued over a lifetime by an enemy bent on revenge, throughout the saga the honourable Thorstein lifts his sword only in defence, never in anger. Ultimately, Jokul's pursuit of his sworn enemy succeeds in teaching him and the reader the true nature of forgiveness. It is not until Thorstein's mercy teaches Jokul what honour truly is that Jokul is able to reach peace and that most vital ingredient of all Norse saga victories, prosperity.

A romantic fiction

Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar is by no means one of the most ancient tales of the Norse period and dates instead from the 14th century. It was written as a prequel to The saga of Frithjof the Bold, but whilst that story has far more ancient roots in Norse mythology, Thorstein's saga can boast no such grand tradition.

Instead, *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar* is purely fiction. It emerged during the later part of the Scandinavian saga period, in which myths and legends were enhanced and complemented by romantic tales of adventure, and it tells of an idealised 'Viking's son'. The Thorstein of this saga should not be confused with Thorstein Eiriksson, the son of Erik the Red, nor with Thorstein the Black, who appears in other Norse sagas. Thorstein's descendants do, however, appear not only in the saga of Frithjof the Bold but also in the apparently unfinished *Gautreks saga*. Both of these sagas predate *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar.*



The saga of Thorstein, Viking's Son, was written as a prequel to the more famous saga of Frithjof the Bold

© Getty; S Solbergj

'Frithjof's Saga', as depicted by Swedish artist August Malmström (1829-1901)

THE SAGA OF BOLD FRITHJOF

Frithjof is the iconic hero in the ultimate Viking love story, whose rediscovery sparked a mania for all things Viking

Written by Jerry Glover

King Beli ruled over Sogne fjord in western Norway with his two sons, Helgi and Halfdan, and his daughter, the fair and wise Ingeborg, named for his sister, who was his most esteemed child. Across the fjord, lived Frithjof, the tallest, stoutest, and best-loved of men. He was foster brother to Ingeborg, for a wise and trusted landowner called Hilding tutored the pair to ensure their safe nurturing.

They grew up together, dancing in the woods like the elf-king and his queen, and sailing the fjord. Once, Frithjof dared to retrieve chicks from an eagle's nest for her. He even hunted bears (unarmed!) to earn Ingeborg's friendly gaze, and carved their initials on the birch tree, while she made a wreath for his brow from spring flowers. He declared his love for her to the gods, though Hilding cautioned him; she was the King's daughter, and so was destined for a more noble life than he could give her. "All strength is noble born", laughed Frithjof, citing the thunder-god Thor who valued worth over birth.

Sensing death's approach, old Beli advised his sons to be sensible rulers, and to maintain friendship with Frithjof and his father, Thorstein Vikingson, ruler of a third of the realm. Shortly after Beli died, Thorstein fell sick, whereupon he implored Frithjof to respect the rule of Beli's sons. Upon his death, Thorstein was interred in a mound next to his old friend Beli. And so, Frithjof inherited Ellide, the marvellous dragon-ship given to his grandfather by the sea god Aegir, as well as Angervadil, a gold-hilted sword, and a gold armring made by Volund the legendary smith.

Despite the enmity of kinsmen who looked down on him due to his lower social status, Frithjof wooed Ingeborg. During a feast at his homestead, they rejected his intentions towards her, to which a downcast Frithjof declared that he would never help them, no matter how much they needed it, which restored his joy.

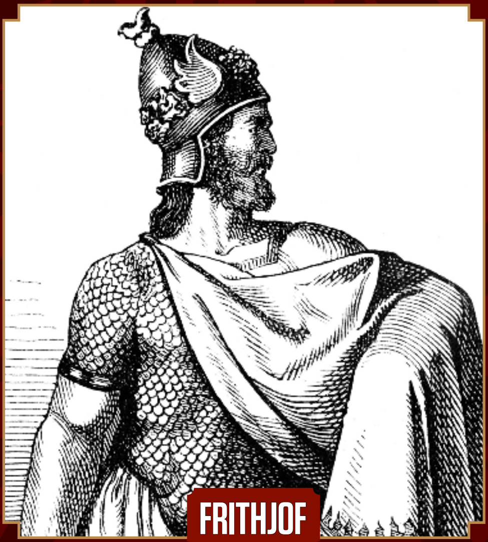
Hearing of this falling out, the mighty King Hring tried to extort and intimidate Beli's sons. Lacking sufficient fighters, they sent Hilding to ask Frithjof for assistance. Frithjof was playing a board game when Hilding entreated him, and sent his old foster parent back with a reply replete with cryptic allusions to the game and to the brewing trouble, which he called 'the double game' and 'the red piece', alluding to his situation concerning Ingeborg.

Frithjof then took his fine ship Ellide to the sacred shrine hall of Baldr's Mead, where Ingeborg and eight maidens were gathered. Ingeborg was taken aback by his presence since it was strictly forbidden for men to solicit women at the shrine. "I esteem your love more than the gods' hate," he asserted, then pledged his gold armring to her. Thus, they plighted their troth, and Frithjof regularly made love to Ingeborg at Baldr's Mead at nighttime thereafter.

Outnumbered by Hring's fighters, Ingeborg's brothers swore fealty and agreed to let Hring marry her. To atone for the shame of Frithjof's behaviour at the shrine, they further demanded that Frithjof gather tribute from the Orkney Islands. Despite misgivings and a deep mistrust of them, Frithjof agreed, and with 18 good men, he set forth in Ellide.

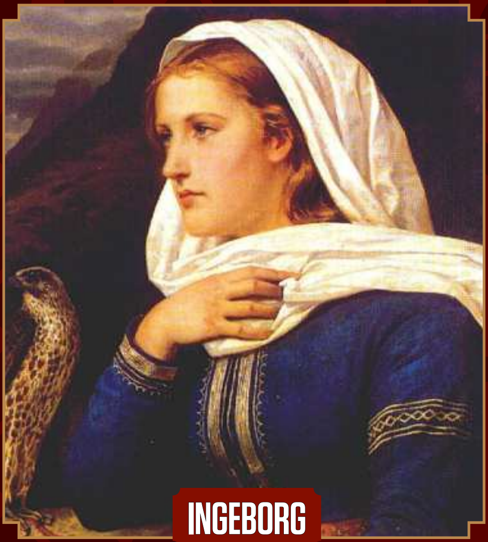
ROMANTIC LEADS

Bold heroes and a beautiful princess



FRITHJOF

TThe son of a prominent landowner in western Norway and the grandson of a Viking, Frithjof is not noble born yet his beloved, Ingeborg, is a king's daughter. The difference in their social statuses and their unlawful meeting at Baldur's shrine, risking the wrath of the gods, makes Frithjof one of the great romantic characters in all Norse sagas. He becomes king of Ringerike, and fathers two sons.



INGEBORG

Ingeborg is the daughter of the legendary Norwegian King Beli. After her mother's death, she (and Frithjof) are fostered by Hilding, the king's wisest and most trusted. The pair grow up together, going from best friends to betrothed lovers. For most of the saga, Ingeborg merely serves to motivate Frithjof, although glimpses of her independent spirit are shown throughout. She mothered two children: Gunnthiof and Hunniof.

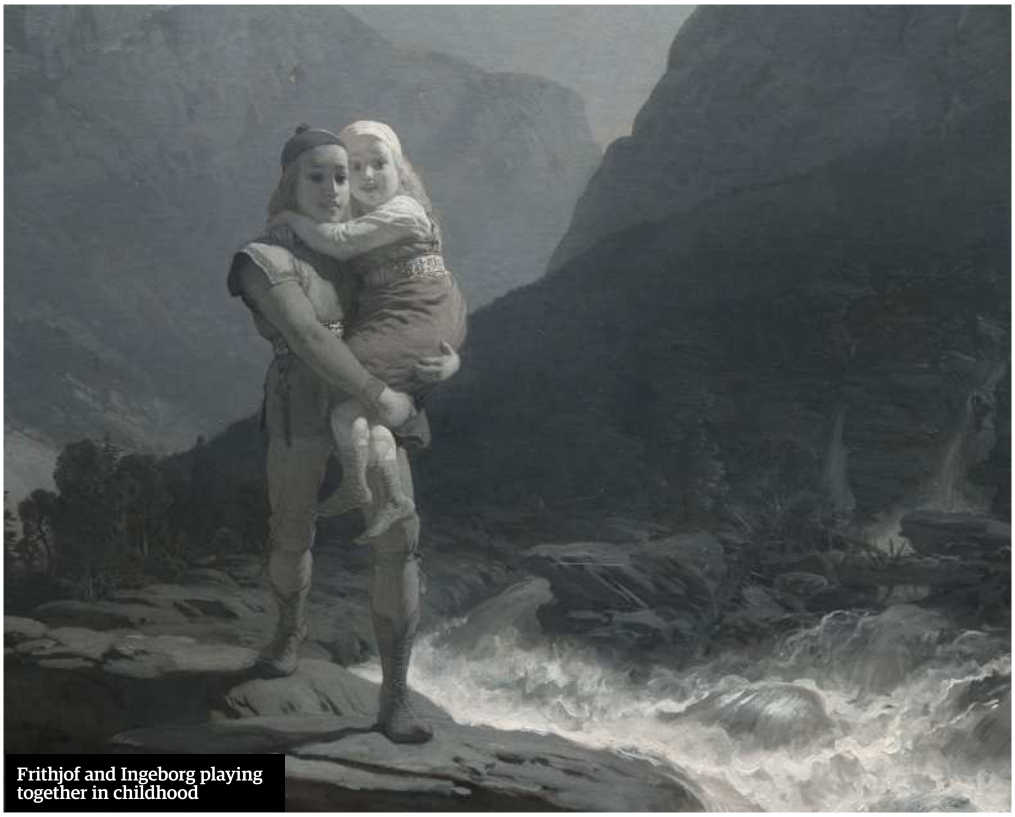
THORSTEIN

Frithjof's father, Thorstein, only features in the saga to tell his son to respect the sons of his old friend, King Beli, before dying. He does, however, have his own separate saga that takes place in the 7th century. Thorstein's adventures include being twice shipwrecked by magic spells, and being rescued by a cursed lady, who is the aunt of Frithjof's beloved Ingeborg.

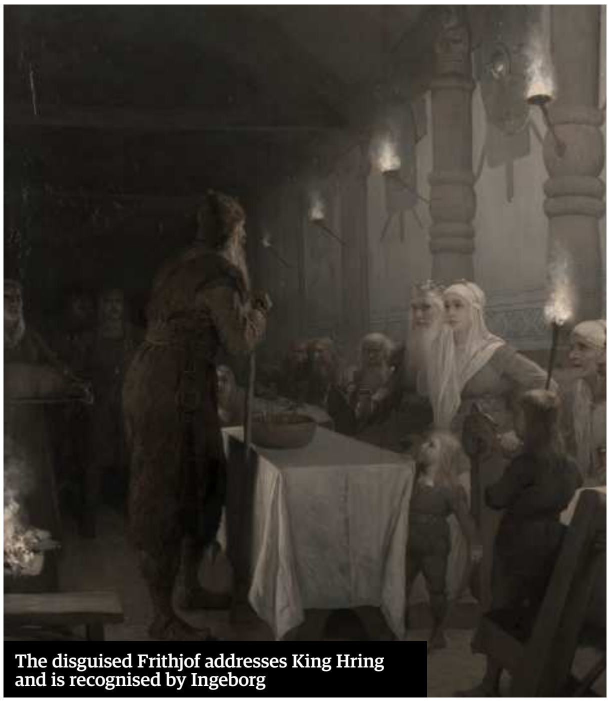
When Frithjof was gone, King Halfdan plundered and burned down his homestead and hired a pair of witches, Heidi and Hamglom, to raise a sea-storm to destroy Ellide. As the tempest rose, abated, and rose again, great waves crashed over the bows, and Frithjof sang rousing songs. Four men were lost overboard and the bulwark broke. Fearing further losses, Frithjof hewed his ring into pieces and shared it between his men so that they would be made welcome in the house of Ran, goddess of the sea. From the masthead, he sighted apparitions of the witches riding on the back of a whale. Using a forked beam and Ellide's prow, he broke their backs (of their real bodies back on land), whereupon the whale dived deep and the gale abated. They made land at Effia Sound, with Frithjof bearing eight men to the foreshore. All of them were welcomed by Angantyr, jarl of Orkney.

That autumn, King Hring married Ingeborg. When he asked about her gold armring, she claimed her father had owned it. Hring saw through this lie and made King Helgi's queen take it for safekeeping until Frithjof returned. His love for Ingeborg was great.

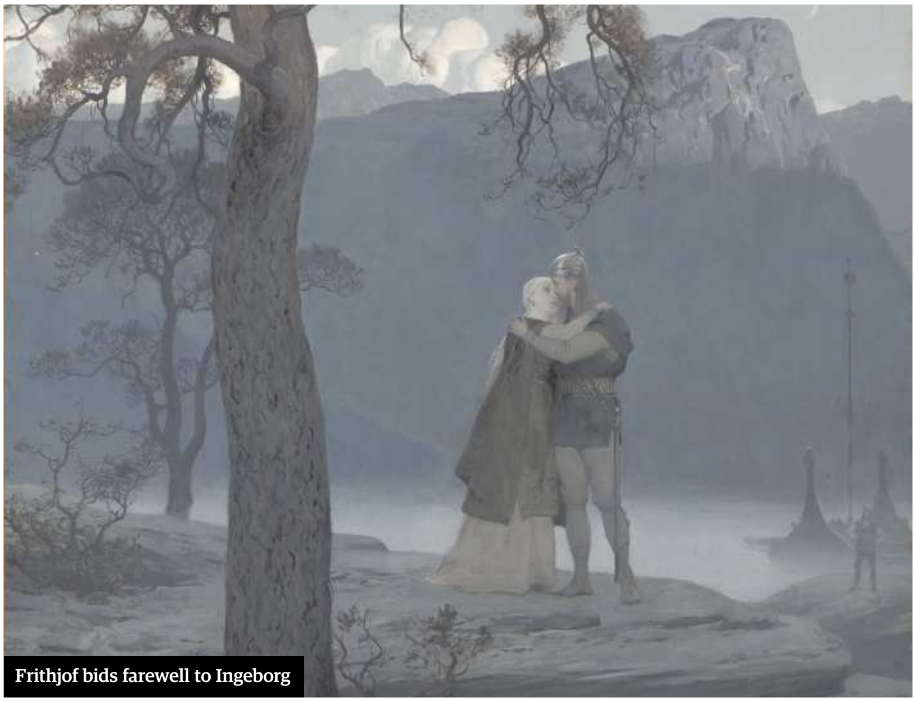
Frithjof left Orkney the following spring, having made friends with Angantyr, an old friend of his father, Thorstein. Upon their return, they found Frithjof's estate razed, so he went to Baldr's Mead where the kings were feasting for midsummer. Frithjof's men scuttled their ships as Frithjof entered the shrine, finding few folk there as most were drinking elsewhere. With a berserker's fury, he flung a purse containing silver at King Helgi's face so hard he knocked out Helgi's teeth, and the king would have fallen into the fire had he not been saved by



Frithjof and Ingeborg playing together in childhood



The disguised Frithjof addresses King Hring and is recognised by Ingeborg



Frithjof bids farewell to Ingeborg

“Enraged by the low-born Frithjof becoming king, Helgi gathered an army”

Halfdan. Seeing how Helgi’s wife was wearing his gold armring as she anointed Baldr’s idol by the fire, Frithjof dragged her by it towards the door, knocking the idol into the fire. Fuelled by the anointing oils, the flames leapt to the roof and engulfed the whole building (though some say Frithjof threw a firebrand into the roof). Frithjof and his men fled to their ships, followed by Kings Helgi and Halfdan and their men. Finding his ships scuttled, King Helgi aimed an arrow at Frithjof, drawing his bow so hard it broke.

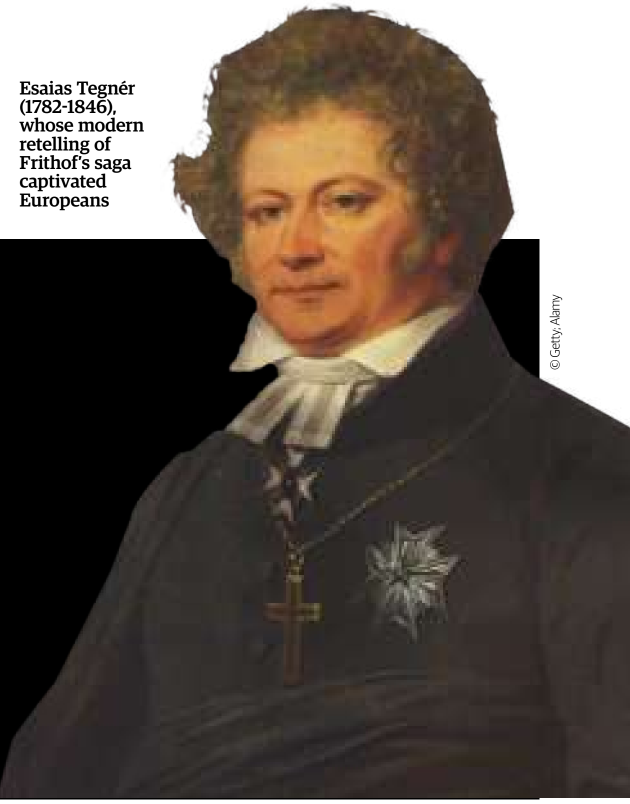
For the next three years, the outcast Frithjof roamed the seas, as well as swimming to the coasts of Greece. He grew richer by slaying only wicked men, earning the name Frithjof the Bold. Wearying of these warring deeds, he returned to King Hring’s house disguised as a foolish old salt-boiler. Ingeborg wanted him to leave, but the king allowed Frithjof a high-seat beside him. When Frithjof removed his cloak, revealing a silver belt with a purse, his sword, and the splendid gold armring, Ingeborg flushed blood red at the sight of the armring and would not talk to him. Frithjof enjoyed the king’s company through the winter, while Queen Ingeborg mainly shunned him. One time he saved the king and queen from drowning in a frozen river. Even then, the king addressed him as ‘Thief.’

The next spring Frithjof and Hring trekked to a forest where they found themselves alone. As the king fell asleep, Frithjof drew his sword and cast it away. Upon waking, the king admitted he knew Frithjof’s true identity all along. Then the drink flowed freely in the hall as the folk celebrated Frithjof’s return.

The time came when Frithjof wanted to leave. Singing his thanks for their hospitality, he cast the ring towards Ingeborg, causing the king to remark how Frithjof thanked her more than he even though she had been less friendly to him. Ingeborg did not want to feast the occasion, but Hring insisted, so Frithjof sang his farewells, whereupon Hring sang about his gifts to Frithjof: his wife and lands, and the title of king. Frithjof was given rule over all Hring’s realm. The king fell sick and died soon after, and the celebration of his life was also the occasion of Frithjof and Ingeborg’s wedding.

Enraged by the low-born Frithjof becoming king, Ingeborg’s brother, Helgi gathered an army, but during the battle, Frithjof personally slew him. The other brother, Halfdan, accepted Frithjof as his lord. Frithjof ruled until he gave Hringrealm to Hring’s son, and he also ruled Hordaland afterwards. His children were Gunnthiof and Hunniof, both to become men of might.

This saga of 24 ballads, each with a different verse style, is one of the *fornaldarsögur*, legendary sagas by an unknown author, set around the 8th century. Its story continues a saga about Frithjof’s father, Thorstein Vikingson, in which there are similar adventures. However, Frithjof’s saga is thought to be an older tale, while that of his father was created later. Clearly the ancient Norse were just as keen on prequels as the fans of Hollywood movies are today.



Esaias Tegnér (1782-1846), whose modern retelling of Frithof’s saga captivated Europeans

© Getty, Alamy

The Viking revival

The saga of Frithjof the Bold survives in two main versions: a shorter Icelandic version composed on vellum in the late 13th or early 14th century, and a longer, paper, version in the 15th century. The skalds of both versions are unknown. The older version describes Hring as a Swedish king, while the later version places half of the story in Hringgariki, Norway. In the 1820s, the Swedish writer Esaias Tegnér published the complete saga. In a curious echo of Frithjof’s plight, Tegnér was tormented by his passion for a married woman in Lund. The first English translation of the saga was published by Reverend William Strong in 1833, and was followed in 1839 by Professor George Strong’s preservation of the verse form. The tale proved hugely popular all over Europe, translating into 14 languages over the 19th century, with more than 20 translations each in English and German.

'Death of a Viking Warrior', painted in 1909 by British artist Charles Ernest Butler

THE CURSE OF THE RING

Romance, murder, incest, dragons, revenge, betrayal, magic and a cursed gold ring - the epic *Völsunga saga* has it all

Written by Melanie Clegg

Action-packed, exciting and full of drama, the epic Icelandic *Völsunga saga* has been inspiring writers, artists and composers since it was written at the end of the 13th century. William Morris and Henrik Ibsen both used it, as well as JRR Tolkien, who wrote his own version, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, and also took elements of it for *The Lord of the Rings*. Richard Wagner also used it as the basis for his masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

The complexity of its plot, with its warring families, shocking betrayals, gruesome murders and doomed romances also foreshadows popular modern fantasy pieces like *Game of Thrones*, which, like the *Völsunga saga*, intertwines supernatural elements such as magic, sorceresses and dragons into the story. There are also the occasional dramatic appearances of various gods, in particular Odin, who we are told is an ancestor of the clan and appears, always heavily disguised, often as a cloaked old man with one eye, at opportune moments to either intervene, cause mischief, offer assistance or subtly direct the course of the story.

Ultimately, though, the *Völsunga saga* remains popular because of its universally appealing themes - those of love, family loyalty, revenge and the importance of honouring one's vows, even if it usually costs the characters dearly and causes a great deal of drama and woe. The many characters of the *Völsunga*, both men and women, are depicted as dynamic, decisive and, above all, in control of their own destinies. Although the decisions that they make often lead to even more disaster and bloodshed, the point is repeatedly made that they follow their paths of their own free will and are, despite Odin's occasional interference, masters of their own fate, driven by whatever factors are most important to them, whether that be love, the honour of their family or simply revenge.

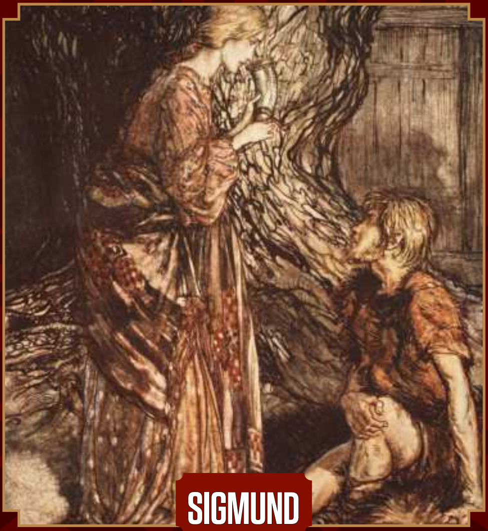
The strength and intelligence of the female characters is also especially noteworthy - they are allowed an independence, agency and individuality that is often all too lacking in ancient tales. Consequently, they make just as much of an impact on the narrative as the men - a reflection on the comparatively privileged status that women enjoyed in Scandinavian society during this period.

Although the *Völsunga* epic was primarily drawn from early Nordic myths about the fictional Völsung clan and was the work of several writers - most significantly the anonymous authors of the Elder Edda, who provided the majority of the material - it also reflected contemporary understanding of the earliest history of the region and the migrations of its people, in particular the destruction of the Burgundian kingdom by the Huns in the 5th century. For the Vikings, the tale, with its courageous men, clever women, great battles, emphasis on honour and acts of enormous valour, represented an allegorical, fictional history that they felt was worthy of the reputation that they were building for themselves as fearsome adventurers and warriors.

It was also evocative of the robust structure of Viking paganism, which involved worshipping a

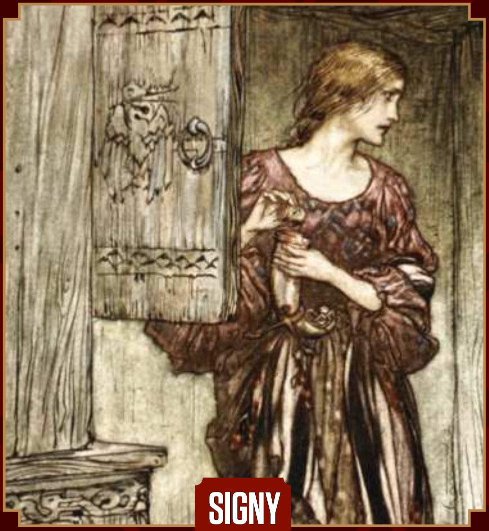
MEET THE VÖLSUNGS

The legendary dynasty was founded by Odin, but cursed by the possession of the magical ring Andvaranaut



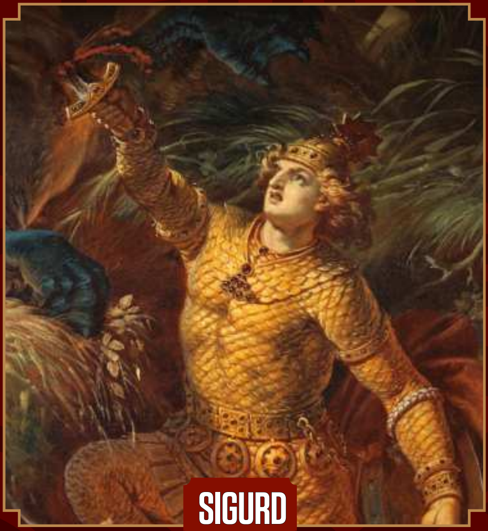
SIGMUND

Sigmund is the eldest son of Völsung and his wife, the giantess Hijod, and he has a twin sister, Signy, and nine younger brothers. When Sigmund pulls the sword Gram from a tree, it starts a deadly rivalry with his brother-in-law Siggeir that results in the destruction of his family. He has two sons: Sinfjotli, the result of incest with his sister, and Sigurd, his son by Hjordis.



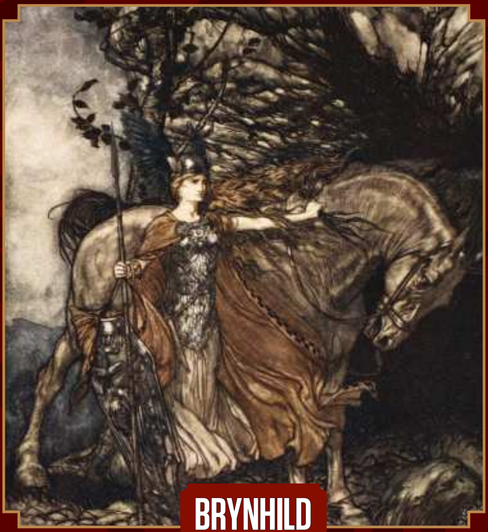
SIGNY

Signy is the only daughter of King Völsung and the twin sister of Sigmund, who she loves very much. She is married against her will to the Geatish king Siggeir, who murders her entire family except for her twin, who she saves and has a son, Sinfjotli, with. After avenging the murder of her family, she chooses to die alongside her husband Siggeir.



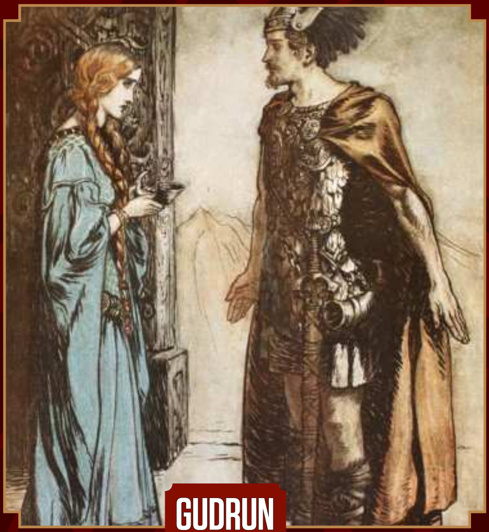
SIGURD

Sigurd is the main focus of several epic tales and is probably based on several actual people such as the Frankish king Sigebert I and the German hero Arminius. He is the son of Sigmund and Hjordis, and is celebrated as a hero in his own time thanks to his defeat of the dragon Fafnir. Although he is in love with Brynhild, he is tricked into marrying Gudrun instead.



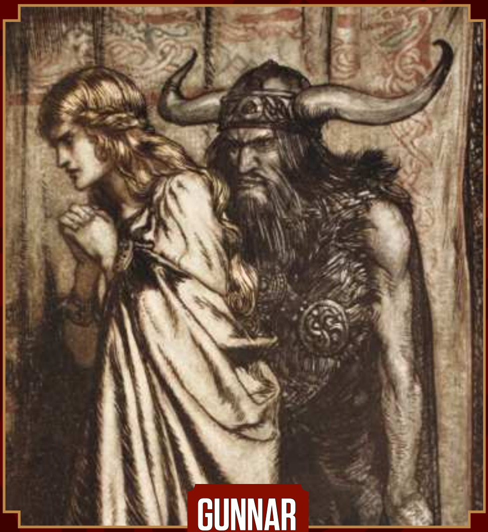
BRYNHILD

The shieldmaiden or valkyrie Brynhild is a central character in several epic tales and is usually represented as a beautiful, fierce young woman preoccupied with warfare and uninterested in romance - until she is awoken from an enchanted sleep by the handsome hero Sigurd. She enacts a terrible revenge on Sigurd after he tricks her into marrying his brother-in-law King Gunnar instead, then kills herself.



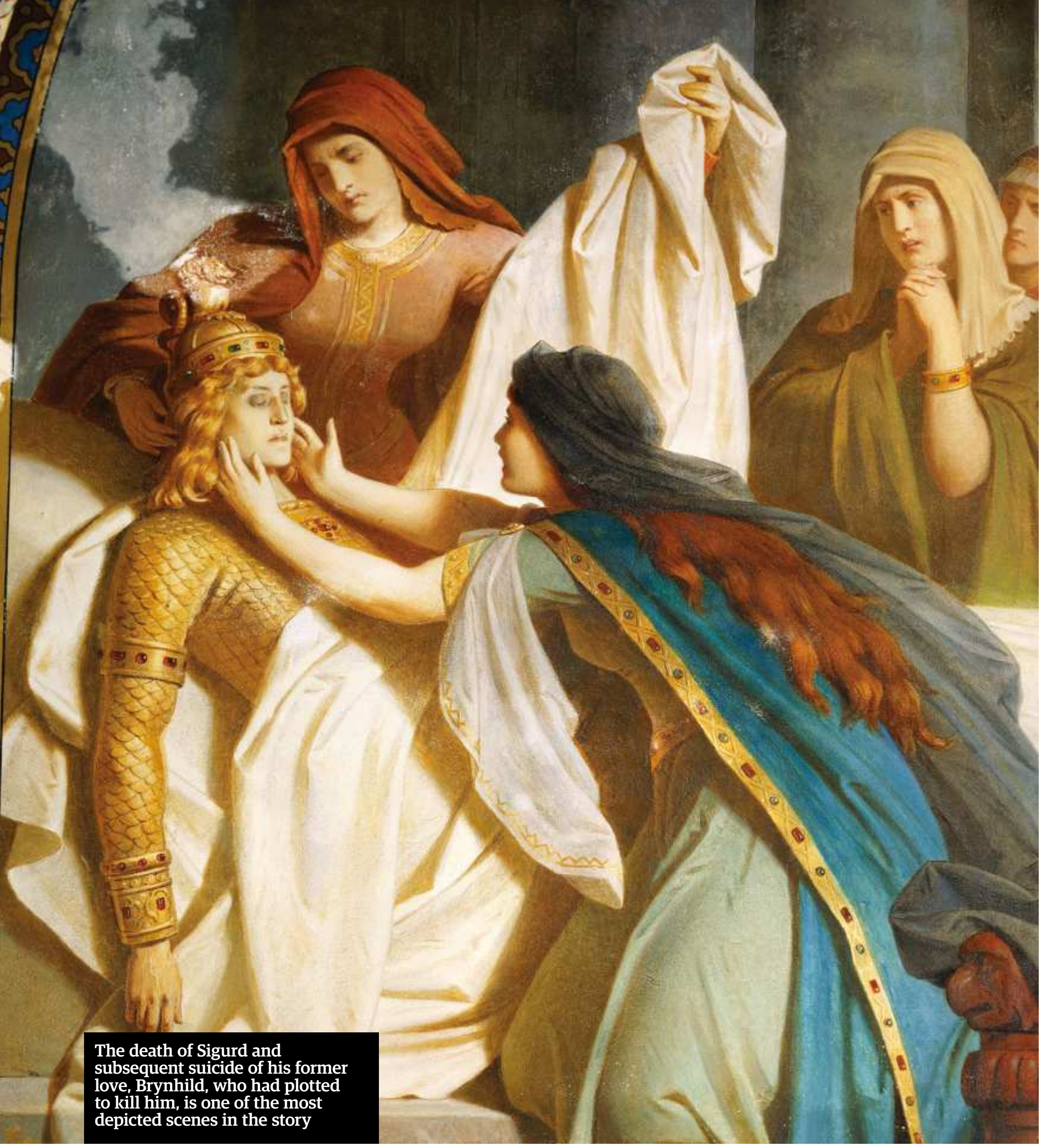
GUDRUN

The wife of Sigurd and later of Atli, Gudrun has an intense rivalry with Brynhild for the affections of the epic hero. Eventually the strife between the two women leads to the death of Sigurd, and the widowed Gudrun finds herself married off to Atli instead. When her new husband covets her family treasure and kills her brothers to claim it, Gudrun kills her children by Atli, makes him eat them and then kills him.



GUNNAR

King of Burgundy and brother to Queen Gudrun, Gunnar is based on an actual historical Germanic king who acted as an ally and enemy to the Roman Empire at various points in his career. In the *Völsunga*, he is a dynamic young man who loves his family and is devoted to his valkyrie wife Brynhild. However, at the end of the saga, he is murdered by his sister's husband, King Atli.



The death of Sigurd and subsequent suicide of his former love, Brynhild, who had plotted to kill him, is one of the most depicted scenes in the story

> "Her father and his troops were killed, while all of her ten brothers were taken"

pantheon of gods and goddesses, all of whom had different attributes and featured in a plethora of stories. Contrary to common belief, the Vikings were quick to adopt elements of Christianity into their religious practices once they had started to encounter it during their travels, and there are echoes of the it in the *Völsunga*. For instance, the dying god motif is repeatedly used as each male hero is violently killed off to be succeeded by his young son, while the description of Gudrun's bloody revenge upon Atli should be familiar to anyone who knows the story of Judith and Holofernes.

Although the *Völsunga saga* ultimately revolves around the exciting life of the hero Sigurd, it starts off by looking back at the story of his ancestors, starting with his great-great-grandfather Sigi, a restless adventurer and warrior who was allegedly fathered by the god Odin. While out hunting one day, Sigi murdered a slave called Bredi and then tried to hide the body in a snowdrift, only to be caught, declared an outlaw and sent away from his tribe. Luckily for him, Odin was on hand to help and provided him with ships and soldiers so that he could become a mighty king in his own right, ruling over the Huns. Once he was established on his throne, Sigi took a wife and had a son, Rerir, who was even more daring and fearless than his father.

However, Sigi's ever-increasing power annoyed his wife's greedy brothers and they rose up against him, eventually killing him in battle and taking over the kingdom as regents on behalf of his son Rerir, who was still too young to rule alone. The boy king never forgot that his uncles had betrayed his father and as soon as he was old enough, he rebelled against them and seized back his throne. But all was not well in Rerir's personal life, for his wife, who he loved very much, had failed to conceive a child despite begging the gods for help. In the end, Frigg, the wife of Odin, decided to intervene by sending the couple a magic apple, which bestowed the gift of fertility. Sadly, though, Rerir died shortly after his wife became pregnant, leaving her in charge of the kingdom.

The widowed queen's pregnancy lasted for six long years until finally she decided that she could not bear it any longer and asked to be cut open so that her child could be born - knowing that this would mean her own death. The baby was a boy and she named him Völsung. He was developed enough at birth to be able to kiss his mother before she died. When he reached adulthood, King Völsung married a giantess called Hijod and the couple had 11 children together, including a pair of twins who they called Sigmund and Signy.

When the beautiful Signy, who was Völsung and Hijod's only daughter, was married to King Siggeir of Gautland against her will, a cloaked stranger, suspected to be Odin, appeared at the wedding celebrations and thrust the magical sword Gram into the Barnstokkr, an ancient tree that grew in the centre of King Völsung's great hall. He then challenged the wedding guests to pull the sword from the tree.

Everyone, including King Siggeir, struggled until Sigmund stepped forward and effortlessly yanked the sword free. His new brother-in-law Siggeir was extremely envious and tried to persuade Sigmund to sell him the sword for three times its weight in gold but Sigmund refused before adding insult to injury by taunting Siggeir for not being able to pull it out himself. Infuriated, Siggeir went home the very next day, forcing the unhappy and unwilling Signy to come with him and vowing that he would get his revenge on her arrogant, upstart family.

After some time had passed, Siggeir invited his wife's father and brothers to visit them and so they travelled across the sea to Gautland. As soon as they landed, Signy arrived to warn them that her husband planned to ambush and kill them but her father told her that he was not a coward and would face whatever danger came his way. Everything that Signy had predicted came to pass the next day and her father and his troops were killed, while all of her ten brothers were taken prisoner.

Siggeir wanted to kill the princes immediately but Signy, who hoped to be able to save some of them, persuaded him to put them in stocks in the woods instead, which would keep them alive for a little longer. However, she was unable to act before a giant she-wolf attacked the imprisoned boys and killed them over the course of several nights. Only Sigmund, Signy's twin, survived thanks to her help and took refuge in a cave in the woods. Resigned to her fate and depressed by the violent death of her family, Signy gave in to Siggeir and bore him two sons, whom she hoped would avenge her family.

When the eldest boy turned ten, she sent him to her brother in the woods and asked him to test his bravery, only for the boy to fail. Signy ordered her brother to kill him, which he did. When the second boy turned ten a few years later, they repeated the process and once again he failed and was killed by his uncle at his mother's request. Signy now had no sons and in despair turned to a beautiful sorceress for help, asking the other woman to exchange shapes with her so that she could go into the woods and trick her twin brother into sleeping with her.

The magic worked and their incestuous union resulted in the birth of another son, this time entirely of her own half-giant stock, who was named Sinfjotli. This boy easily passed all the tests that his mother and uncle-father set him, but while Signy was eager to use him to get revenge on her husband, her brother, who did not know the truth and believed Sinfjotli to be Siggeir's son, remained uncertain that the boy was ready to do their bidding and kill his own 'father'. He decided instead to toughen Sinfjotli up by taking him out into the world and training him to be a brigand, preying on sleeping travellers in order to kill them and steal their money. On one occasion, the hapless duo accidentally stole a pair of magical wolf skins that turned them into wolves when they tried them on and made them even more violent than before.

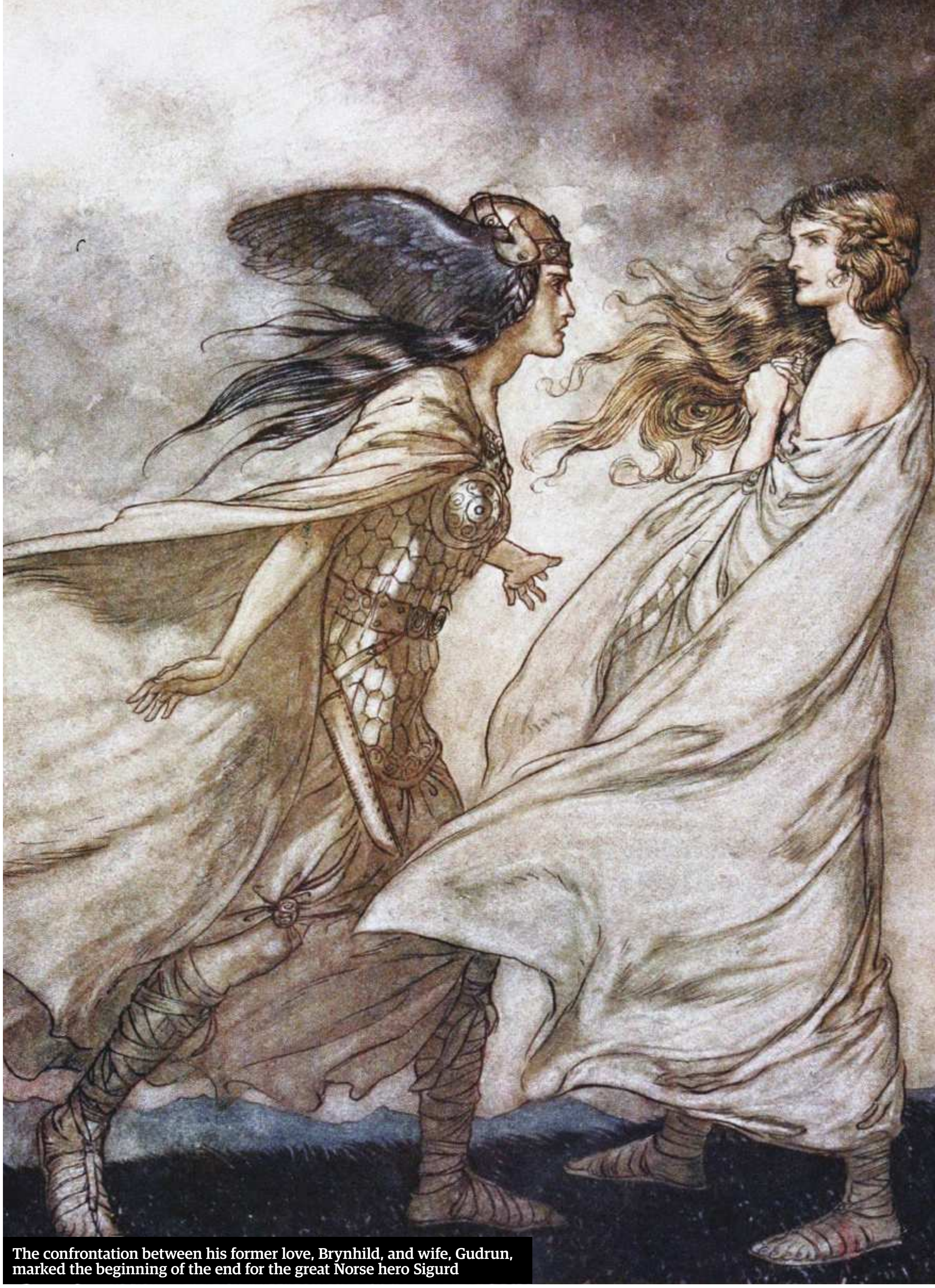
As soon as Sinftojli was ready, Sigmund and Signy put their plan into action and attempted to overthrow King Siggeir, only for the attempt to fail. Sinftojli and Sigmund were sentenced to be buried alive inside a cave but before it was sealed up, Signy smuggled Sigmund's sword Gram inside, hidden inside a bundle of straw. He used the sword to open up the cave and then set fire to Siggeir's great hall, where the tyrant king and all of his men were sleeping.

Before his treacherous brother-in-law burned to death, Sigmund took great pleasure in informing him that the last members of the Völsung family were alive and well despite his best efforts and that this was their revenge upon him. He then urged his sister Signy to come away with him and Sinftojli but she refused, telling him that she was bound to Siggeir by marriage and was willing to die alongside him now that her father and other brothers had been avenged. She then walked into the flames.

Sigmund and Sinftojli returned to their homeland together, where the former claimed back his throne and proved himself to be a very wise and able leader of his people. His first wife, Borghild, gave him two children, the eldest of whom, Helgi, was predicted to become one of the greatest kings on earth and certainly seemed to show a great deal of promise while he was growing up. He often went out raiding with Sinftojli and on one occasion they encountered the lovely Sigrun, who he immediately fell madly in love with. Unfortunately she was already betrothed to another man, King Hodbrodd, but this didn't stop the lovers from plotting to do away with him and seize his kingdom for themselves, which they then duly did with the assistance of Sinftojli.

Seeing how happy Helgi and Sigrun were together made Sinftojli long for a wife of his own but he made the mistake of choosing a woman who was betrothed to Queen Borghild's brother, resulting in the two men fighting a duel that Sinftojli won after killing his rival. When Sigmund refused Borghild's request that Sinftojli be exiled as a punishment for killing her brother, she took matters into her own hands and poisoned him, devastating Sigmund, who immediately ordered that she be the one to leave his lands forever and never return.

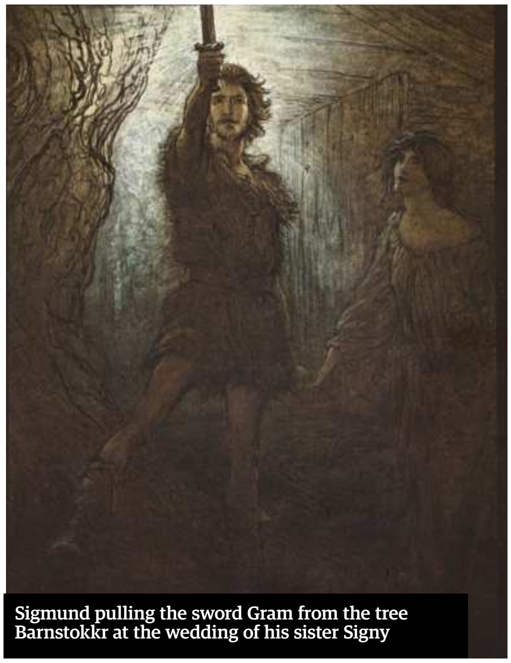
Sigmund waited several years before taking another wife, this time choosing Hjordis, the daughter of King Eylimi, who had another suitor, King Lyngvi. Eylimi told his daughter that she was free to choose her own husband and she opted for Sigmund, saying that he might be much older than her other suitor but he was still by far the greater king and it would be an honour to be his wife. Lyngvi took his rejection very badly and declared war on Sigmund, engaging him in a ferocious battle that was interrupted by the sudden arrival of Odin, who attacked Sigmund with a spear. Sigmund struck the spear with his sword Gram but it broke into two, at which point he knew that the battle was lost for Odin had at last forsaken him.


The confrontation between his former love, Brynhild, and wife, Gudrun, marked the beginning of the end for the great Norse hero Sigurd

As he lay dying after the battle, he informed his wife, Hjordis, that she was already pregnant with his son and that one day the boy would also be a great king and carry the restored sword Gram, which he entrusted to her until that day should come. After his death, Hjordis ran away from the camp and was rescued by a Viking prince, Alf, the son of Hjalprek, king of Denmark, who took pity on her plight and agreed to marry her and care for her son, who they named Sigurd. The young Sigurd grew up at his stepfather's court and impressed everyone with his good looks, courage and intelligence. Once, while walking through the forest on his way to find a new horse, he was approached by Odin, disguised as an old man, who helped him choose a handsome grey horse that had never before been mounted, telling him that it was descended from his own magical eight-legged steed Sleipnir. Sigurd called the horse Grani and it remained with him for many years.

When he was very young, Sigurd was fostered by the dwarf Regin, the son of a wealthy sorcerer, Hreidmar, who had ended up working as a smith at Alf's court. Regin was highly intelligent and taught the young Sigurd languages, songs, sports, chess and how to read runes. They became very close and eventually Regin told Sigurd the truth about how he had ended up working as a lowly blacksmith when he should have had rank and power.

Sigurd listened, enraptured, as Regin spoke to him about his two elder brothers - Fafnir, who was very strong and bad tempered, and Otr, who was a



Sigmund pulling the sword Gram from the tree Barnstokkr at the wedding of his sister Signy

> "The beautiful valkyrie Brynhild lay in a deep enchanted sleep, awaiting the arrival of a man who shows no fear"

skilful fisherman, thanks to his ability to assume the form of an otter. Sadly, Otr's magical ability ended in tragedy when it resulted in him being accidentally killed by the god Loki, who then skinned him. When he realised his mistake, Loki offered to compensate Otr's surviving brothers and father with the otter's skin filled with gold, which was taken from an avaricious dwarf named Andvari. Naturally, Andvari wasn't best pleased to be deprived of his own treasure and so tried to keep back a very special ring, which he had called the Andvaranaut - it was said to be able to make more gold. However, he was quickly apprehended and forced to hand the ring over, but not before he had placed a curse upon it that would bring death and destruction to anyone other than him who owned it.

Loki warned Regin and his family about the curse, but they still insisted upon having the ring. As a result, Fafnir went mad, killing his own father to seize the treasure for himself before turning into a dragon. Regin offered to repair Sigmund's broken sword Gram in exchange for Sigurd killing the dragon Fafnir in order to retrieve his family's fortune and avenge the murder of his father, Hreidmar, but the boy's uncle Gripir, who was a respected soothsayer, advised caution and told Sigurd that he must first avenge the death of his own father, Sigmund, before complying with Regin's request.

Encouraged by his mother and stepfather, Sigurd gathered together a large army and attacked King Lyngvi, whom he killed with Gram. He then returned home, ready to face the dragon and retrieve the treasure that he was guarding. When Sigurd and Regin arrived at the heath where Fafnir was living, they came upon a track that the dragon used to get to a nearby lake and decided to dig a trench underneath, from which Sigurd could stab Fafnir as he crawled overhead. At this point, Odin, once again disguised as an old man, appeared beside them and advised that they should dig two trenches - one to hide in and another to carry away the dragon's blood. Once the trenches were ready, Regin panicked and ran away to hide in a hedge, leaving Sigurd to stab the dragon in the heart as it crossed his ditch.

As he lay dying, Fafnir asked who had killed him and then said: "Upon my death, you may well take my treasure but you will see little benefit from it. The gold and Regin will be your death as surely as you have been mine." As soon as Fafnir was dead, Regin came out of his hiding place and drank some of the dragon's blood before asking Sigur to cut out the heart and roast it so that he could eat it.

As Sigurd roasted the organ, he poked it with his finger to see if it was done and then licked away the blood, at which point he magically developed the ability to understand the singing of the birds that perched overhead. Giving away nothing to Regin, he listened as the birds, a pair of nuthatches, discussed how Regin was obviously planning to increase his strength by eating the heart before killing Sigurd and making off with all of the treasure. It would be better, they decided, if Sigurd killed Regin and then ate the heart himself, which would make him the strongest and wisest of all men. Then he could take the treasure and ride on to Hindarfjall, where the beautiful valkyrie Brynhild lay in a deep enchanted sleep, awaiting the arrival of a man who shows no fear, who is the only person who can awaken her. Sigurd barely hesitated before decapitating his foster father with his sword then eating half of the dragon's heart. He then followed the trail back to Fafnir's lair where he found the treasure, loaded up his horse with as much as he could carry and set off to rescue Brynhild from her enchantment.

Upon arriving at Hindarfjall, Sigurd discovered the sleeping Brynhild still dressed in her valkyrie's shieldmaiden armour. She woke as he approached and explained that Odin had cast a spell on her as punishment for disobeying him. Although Brynhild was really only interested in her valkyrie duties and warfare, she liked Sigurd enough to agree to marry him and then spent some time teaching him songs and new rune spells to help him fight. Sigurd then escorted her to the home of her sister Brekkhild and remained there for some time, although he did not see much of Brynhild, who insisted upon keeping to her chambers.

Eventually, Sigurd plucked up the courage to visit her and discovered that she was working on a tapestry depicting his noble deeds, particularly his fight with the dragon Fafnir. Overcome with love, he took her into his arms and once again vowed to wed her, only for her to reply that she was too dedicated to her vocation as a shieldmaiden to ever marry and besides, it was his destiny to marry Gudrun, the only daughter of King Gjuki. Sigurd refused to listen though and informed her that he would never marry anyone but her before giving her the ring Andvaranaut and making her vow that they would be man and wife one day.

The origins of the *Völsunga*

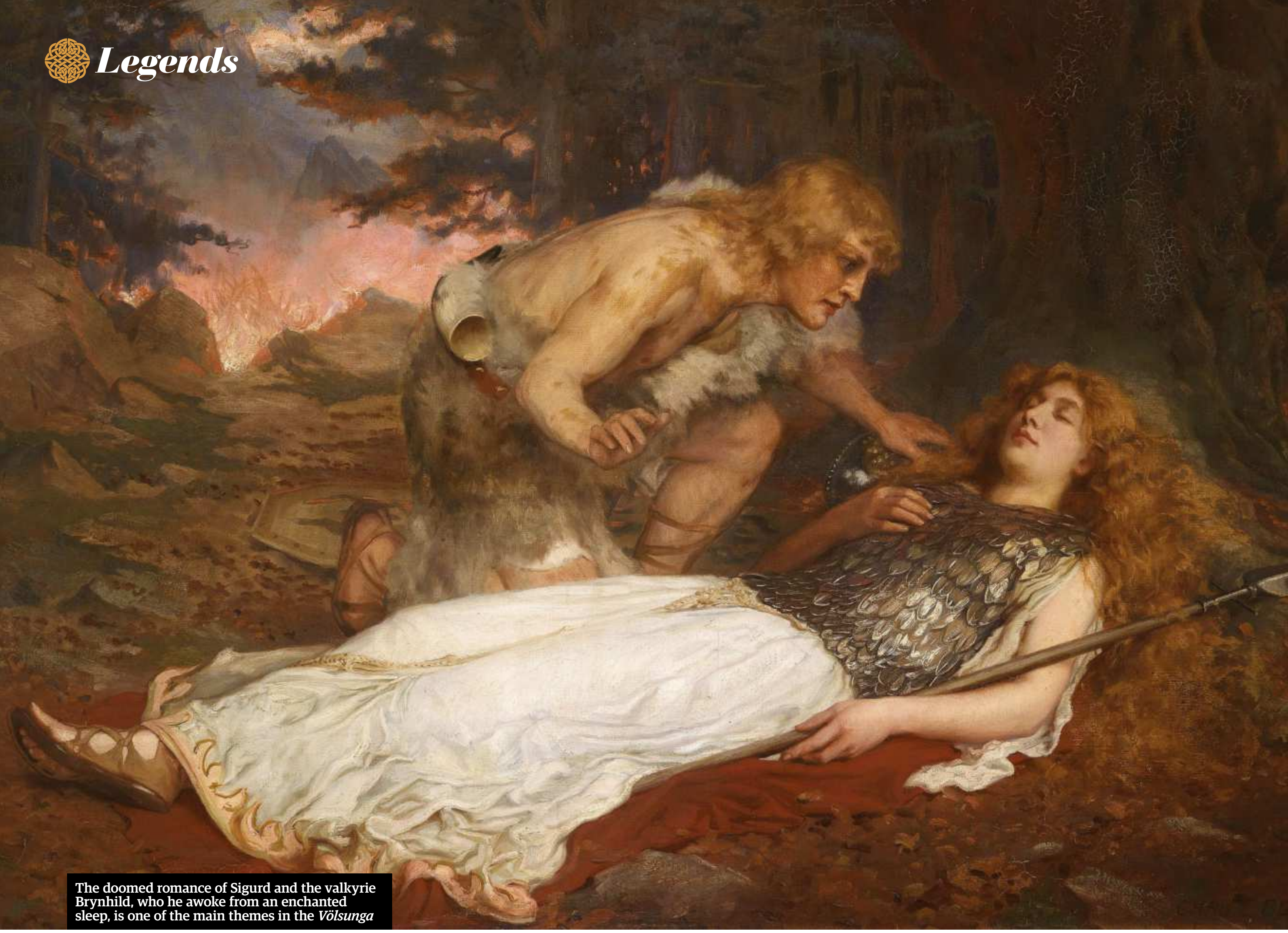
Going back to the beginning of one of the Viking epics

Detail of the 12th-century carved portal of Hylestad stave church, depicting Sigurd killing Fafnir

It's not known who the author of the *Völsunga* was as the text is drawn from many different sources and puts together a variety of legends and stories about Sigurd and his family, transforming them into a chronological epic tale. The story as we know it today was the creation of anonymous writers and bards whose work is known collectively as the Elder Edda, which recorded old stories about fictional heroes and real people that had usually been passed down via oral storytelling, and obviously added their own dramatic flourishes over time.

There is also overlap between the *Völsunga* and another great heroic lay of the period, the *Nibelungenlied*, an epic Germanic poem from around 1200 that features many of the same characters and events. Certainly, it would seem that the stories featured in the *Völsunga* come from a variety of regions, all pulled together to create a cohesive plot that covers many generations.

It is clear that even in the late 13th century, which is when the earliest known written version was created, the story was presented as historical and it was made clear that the events had happened in the distant past. The earliest known visual representation of a *Völsunga* character is the impressive Nordic Ramsund Carving, which depicts scenes from the story of Sigurd and Fafnir, and dates from around 1030.



The doomed romance of Sigurd and the valkyrie Brynhild, who he awoke from an enchanted sleep, is one of the main themes in the *Völsunga*

Shortly after this, Gudrun herself went to see Brynhild and told her that she had been having peculiar dreams about a golden hawk landing on her head and Brynhild killing a golden stag that she was trying to tame. Unable to lie, Brynhild told Gudrun that the dreams were prophesying that she would marry the hero Sigurd, the man who she herself had chosen as a husband, thanks to the machinations of her mother, the sorceress queen Grimhild. But the marriage would be short-lived and she would ultimately end up married to King Atli instead, before killing him.

Gudrun was horrified by Brynhild's interpretation of her dreams but quietly complied when everything came to pass as the other woman had foretold. Her mother gave Sigurd a potion that made him forget his commitment to Brynhild and propose to Gudrun instead. They married and after Gudrun ate the other half of the dragon's heart at the wedding feast. She gave birth to a son, another Sigmund, who was every bit as strong and brave as his father, and a daughter, Svanhild, who was as lovely as her mother.

Meanwhile, Queen Grimhild was conniving to marry her son Gunnar to the abandoned Brynhild, only for her to refuse his advances because of her promise to marry no one but Sigurd, even though he was now married to someone else. When Gunnar and Sigurd rode together to her father's home to ask for her hand in marriage, they found Brynhild standing alone inside a magic ring of fire that Gunnar was unable to pass through until he had swapped forms with Sigurd, her promised husband, who was the only one able to cross the flames.

Impressed by his courage, Brynhild agreed to become 'Gunnar's' wife and they spent three nights together, during one of which he secretly removed the Andvaranaut ring and replaced it with an ordinary one. After he had left her side, Gunnar swapped forms with Sigurd again to celebrate his marriage with Brynhild, who was unaware that he had tricked her into marrying him. She would discover the truth much later on from Gudrun, who taunted Brynhild and showed her the ring Andvaranaut as proof that Sigurd had been the one to cross the flames and not Gunnar.

Devastated by this betrayal, Brynhild vowed that the deceitful actions of her husband and former lover would result in all of their deaths unless Gunnar killed Sigurd. Unwilling to do so himself, Gunnar fed his wayward youngest brother Guttorm a snake and wolf meat stew that would make him aggressive then ordered him to stab Sigurd while he was sleeping. Guttorm did as he asked but the blow did not immediately kill Sigurd, who used his last reserves of strength to hurl the sword Gram at the fleeing princeling, slicing him in two. Gudrun, who was sleeping next to Sigurd, was woken up by all of the commotion and screamed to find her husband dead beside her and his blood all over the bed. Brynhild heard Gudrun's anguished screams and started to laugh but then broke down and began to scream herself, tormented by guilt and horror. Ignoring her husband's pleas, she stabbed herself with her sword and with her dying breath asked to be burnt alongside Sigurd on his funeral pyre.

Horrified by the violent end of her marriage, Gudrun ran away and took refuge at the court of King Half of Denmark, where she lived in peace and safety until her mother Grimhild managed to track her down in order to inform her that another marriage had been arranged for her, this time to King Atli, as Brynhild had predicted years before. Gudrun warned her mother that this second marriage would also not end well but when Grimhild insisted that she comply, she unwillingly gave her consent to the match and travelled to King Atli's court, which

> "They realised at once that Atli's intentions towards them were hostile"

involved seven days on horseback, seven days at sea and then another seven days gruelling journey overland. Gudrun's arrival was celebrated with a huge festival but the splendid wedding ceremonies could not hide the fact that the newly married couple had no great liking for each other, although they would still manage to have two children together.

To Gudrun's dismay, she discovered that her new husband was obsessed with the legendary treasure that Sigurd had stolen from the dragon Fafnir and had decided that it must now be in the possession of her two surviving brothers, Gunnar and Hogni, when by rights it should have been inherited by Gudrun upon Sigurd's death and formed part of her dowry when she married him. Determined to get his hands on the loot, and ignoring the fact that it was cursed, he decided to invite his brothers-in-law to his court for a great feast in order to overcome them and seize their treasure for himself.

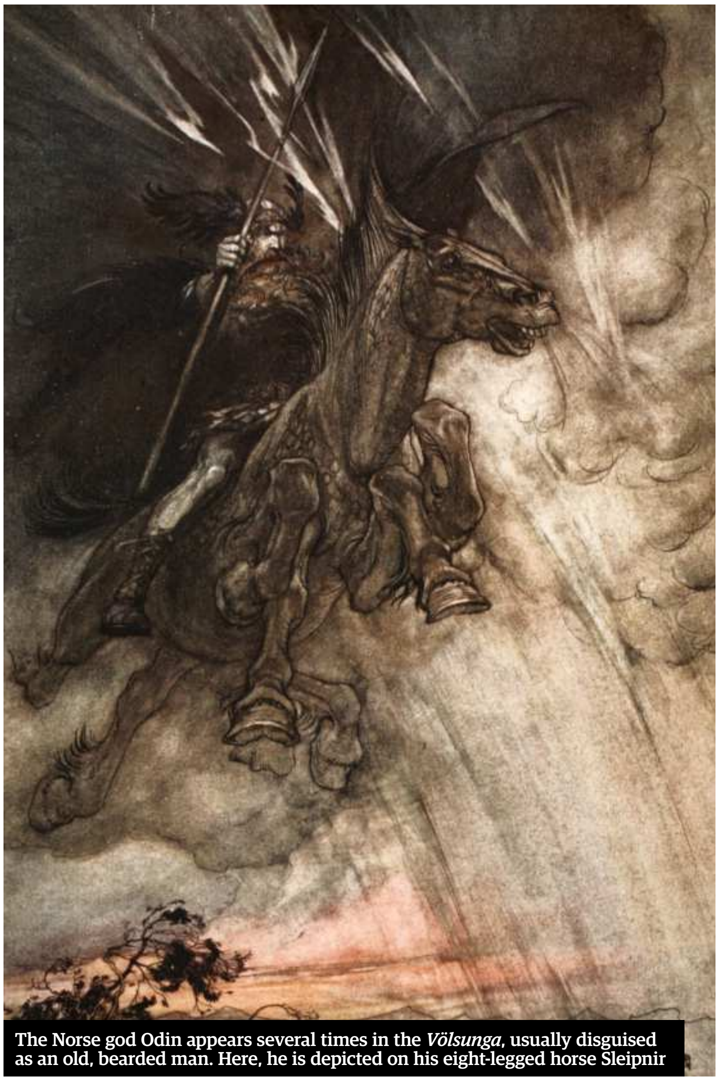
The suspicious Gudrun sent her brothers a coded runic message telling them to refuse the invitation but her warning was intercepted and changed into a reassurance that they would be perfectly safe at King Atli's court. Luckily for the brothers, Hogni's wife Kostbera was skilled at reading runes and realised at once that Gudrun's original message had been tampered with, which meant that they were all forewarned of Atli's treacherous plans. Gunnar's wife Glaumvor also had a series of prophetic dreams that suggested that they would be unwise to travel to Atli's court, but her husband and his brother chose to make the journey overseas anyway.

Upon arriving in King Atli's lands, they realised at once that his intentions towards them were hostile. However, they continued on until they arrived at their brother-in-law's court, where he greeted them with a demand that they either hand over the treasure or face his wrath. When the brothers stood firm and refused to comply, they were attacked by Atli's men and a terrible battle ensued. Enraged by her husband's treatment of her family, Gudrun put on armour and picked up a sword in order to fight at the side of her brothers, but it was not enough and the two men were captured.

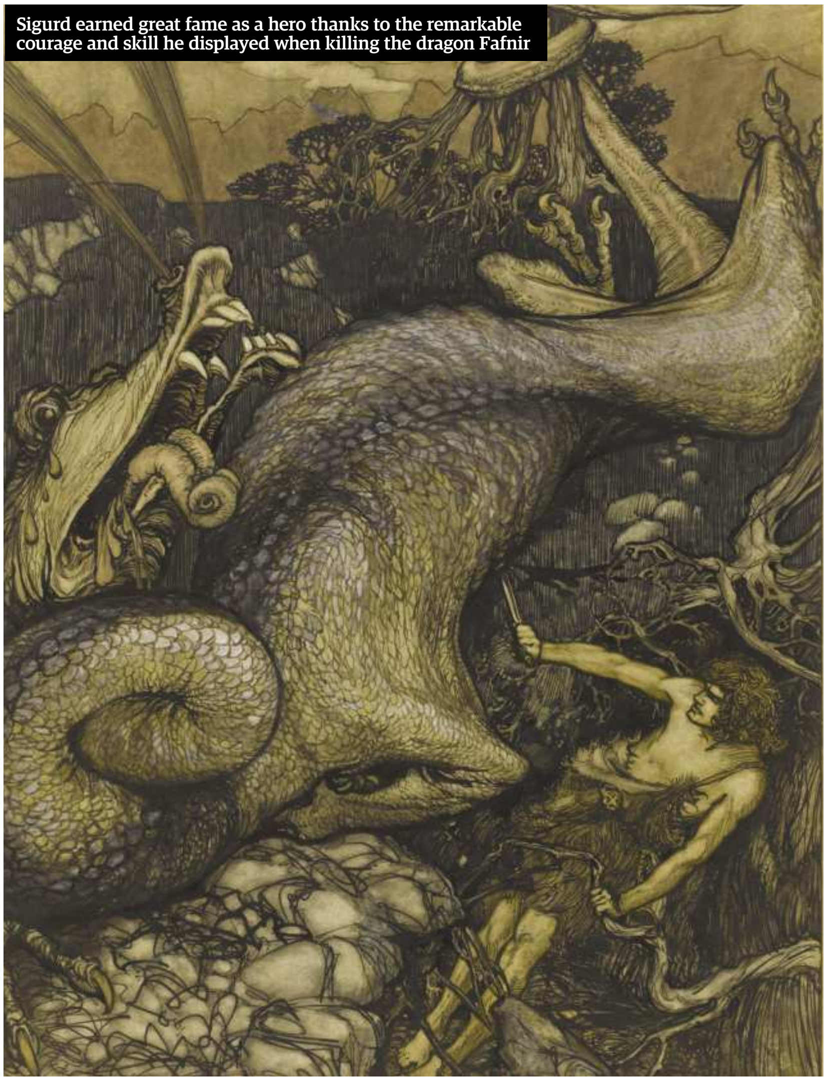
King Atli ordered that Hogni should be killed first by having his heart cut from his body and shown to his brother, after which Gunnar told him that the treasure was hidden and that he was now the only person left alive who knew where it was. Infuriated, Atli had Gunnar bound and thrown into a pit full of snakes, but he managed to hold them off by playing a harp, thrown down to him by sister, with his feet, which charmed the snakes so much that they did not attack him. In the end, however, an enormous adder ignored the tune and bit him over his heart, killing him instantly, much to Atli's delight. Gudrun hid her grief and announced to Atli that he was now her only family and that from that point on she would pledge her loyalty to him alone on condition that he held a suitably splendid funeral feast for her two dead brothers.

On the evening of the feast, Gudrun killed her two children by Atli. She mixed their blood with the wine and roasted their hearts, which were then served to their father. When Atli asked where the children were, she calmly replied that he had drunk their blood and eaten their hearts, sending him into a towering rage. He would have had her killed straight away but he was so drunk that he passed out at the table and had to be put to bed.

That worked in Gudrun's favour – she and her nephew Niflung, a son of Hogni's who had escaped the slaughter of the battle, stabbed King Atli in the heart and set fire to his great hall, killing all of his men. They both then returned home and Gudrun, to her delight, was reunited with her children by Sigurd, while the dragon's treasure, that had caused so much death and destruction, remained lost forever.



The Norse god Odin appears several times in the *Völsunga*, usually disguised as an old, bearded man. Here, he is depicted on his eight-legged horse Sleipnir



Sigurd earned great fame as a hero thanks to the remarkable courage and skill he displayed when killing the dragon Fafnir

© Getty

Ragnar Loðbrók is a legend, but the men who were known as his sons are real historical figures

THE ULTIMATE VIKING

Legend and history meet with Ragnar Loðbrók, the last legendary Viking forefather, the first Viking of history

Written by Edoardo Albert

Listen. Do you hear? That sound. That is the sound of lamentation. Sigurd the dragonslayer and Brynhild the Fair are dead. The trees whisper it, the rivers carry tidings to the heaving, restless sea; the rain and the wind, the sun and the stars tell the news: Sigurd is dead. Brynhild has departed.

There was a man who heard the whisper of rain and wind, who saw the tears of the sun and the grief of the stars. That man was Heimir, foster-father to Brynhild, and his grief for the fair Brynhild was as great as if she had been the daughter of his loins. Then Heimir laid down his plough and put aside his crown and forsook his kingdom. For Brynhild and Sigurd had had a daughter, Aslaug, and they had asked Heimir to take her as foster-daughter in turn. However, Aslaug being only three years old, Heimir had not yet brought her to his own kingdom. But now Heimir put aside all else, even his grief, and rushed to Aslaug. For Sigurd had thrown down many men in his might and now that he was dead and fear of him no longer held his enemies in thrall, they would seek vengeance on his living memory, that the seed of Sigurd and Brynhild be utterly destroyed in this middle-earth.

Heimir brought Aslaug back to his kingdom, Hlymdal. But soon the news began to spread that the flesh of Sigurd and Brynhild lived with Heimir. Aslaug, even as a child, was too beautiful not to be marked. Rumour spread faster than frost: the child of Sigurd and Brynhild the Fair lives in Hlymdal. Heimir, listening, heard the howling, distant but coming closer. The wolves were gathering. There was no keeping Aslaug in Hlymdal. But Heimir realised that he could not just flee, for wherever he went, the girl's beauty and bearing would tell her lineage. No, he must go, but in going, he would have to keep his foster-daughter hidden, always, when they were in sight of men.

So Heimir had a marvellous harp made with cunning and craft, so that little Aslaug might be hidden within it. And with her, in the harp, Heimir stowed precious things: gold and silver, and fine clothes, for he foresaw that they would travel far. Leaving his kingdom, Heimir set forth, a wanderer, a beggar carrying a harp that he might play for his supper and his bed. They wandered far. Whenever they were far from the eyes of men, Heimir would take the harp apart and let little Aslaug bathe. For food while Aslaug was shut in the harp, he gave to her a wine-leek, for its virtue is such that a person may live long on it, even when she has no other food to eat. And when Aslaug cried, for fear of the dark and the confinement of her safety, Heimir would play the harp, quietening her – he was marvellously skilled at the harp.

In his wanderings, Heimir came to Norway, to a farm called Spangareid. An old couple lived there, Áke and his wife Grima. When Heimir knocked on their door, Grima answered, for old Áke was gone to the forest where he was chopping wood.

"Why come you here, stranger?" Grima asked.

"I mean you no harm, old woman," said Heimir. "I am a wanderer, a beggar, far from home. I ask only

THE REAL RAGNAR

A historical legend or merely fiction?

EGNER
DBROG

The sagas start in legend and end in history with diversions into tales of adventure and chivalry throughout. But the saga of Ragnar Loðbrók neatly straddles the transition from legend to history: it begins by anchoring the future wife of Ragnar in the greatest of Norse legend, the story of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer and Brynhild (ignoring the difficulty of Sigurd and Brynhild belonging to a time four centuries earlier), and ends with the sons of Ragnar, men such as Ivar the Boneless and Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye, who are undoubtedly historical figures. Whether Ragnar himself was a historical character remains unknown. While a group of Viking war chiefs were known as sons of Loðbrók, this could refer to a tribal founder as their actual paternal father. But if Ragnar was real, he likely first appears in the historical record in 845 CE, when a Viking chieftain named 'Reginheri' lead 120 longships up the River Seine to attack Paris. According to the French chroniclers, this Ragnar succumbed to the plague that devastated the Vikings besieging Paris. But 'Ragnar' pops up again in the following decades: he raids Scotland and the Isles, settles in Dublin, attacks Anglesey and, finally, dies in a snake-filled pit in York. Actually, Ragnar appears to have died at least five times during his career. It's possible that a series of different Viking chieftains who shared similar names had their stories conflated into one character: Ragnar Loðbrók. Once this process began, the pull of a good hero with name recognition would ensure that other tales would be ascribed to him, in the same way that Arthur, at most a war leader of the Britons, became the exemplar of medieval chivalry. With the modern reinterpretation of Vikings, which has seen them change from bloodthirsty rapists to intrepid explorers and traders, it was only a matter of time before Ragnar Loðbrók would be reimagined for the screen. *Vikings* makes for great television but, even more than the sagas, it conflates different times and characters, making the historical Rollo, the first ruler of Normandy, Ragnar's brother and contemporary, when in reality Ragnar came two generations before Rollo. But such tale making is in keeping with the writers of the sagas: they would have enjoyed *Vikings* as much as we do.

for a space near the fireside so that I might warm these old bones."

"You'll be asking me to feed you once you're sitting by the fire, I'll be bound," said Grima.

But Heimir held up his hands, blue with cold. "I am a harpist. I want only to warm these fingers before the black cold takes them."

"All right," said Grima. "I'll let you in. No food, mind. We've none to spare for beggars."

As Grima fed the fire, Heimir set his harp down beside him then held his hands to the flames. But Grima, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, sharp-witted Grima, saw something hanging from the harp and as she bustled around the farmhouse she looked closer and saw it was a piece of the richest cloth. Then, looking to Heimir, she saw gold glint through the rags wrapping his fingers. Grima realised that this was no ordinary beggar.

"Listen, beggar. I spoke harshly to you, for we see few enough people here on our farm. Stay a while, for my husband will be back soon from the forest, and I will give you food to eat, and a place for you to sleep tonight."

> "If you won't kill him... I'll take the beggar man for my husband and we'll drive you out."

Heimir looked at the crafty old woman but the snow blindness dimmed his sight and he did not see the guile glint in her eye.

"I am grateful, old woman. I fear another night in the open would be the end of me."

"Let me show you where you can sleep."

So the old woman took Heimir to the barley barn and he lay down there, with the harp beside him, to sleep amid the warm sacks of barley.

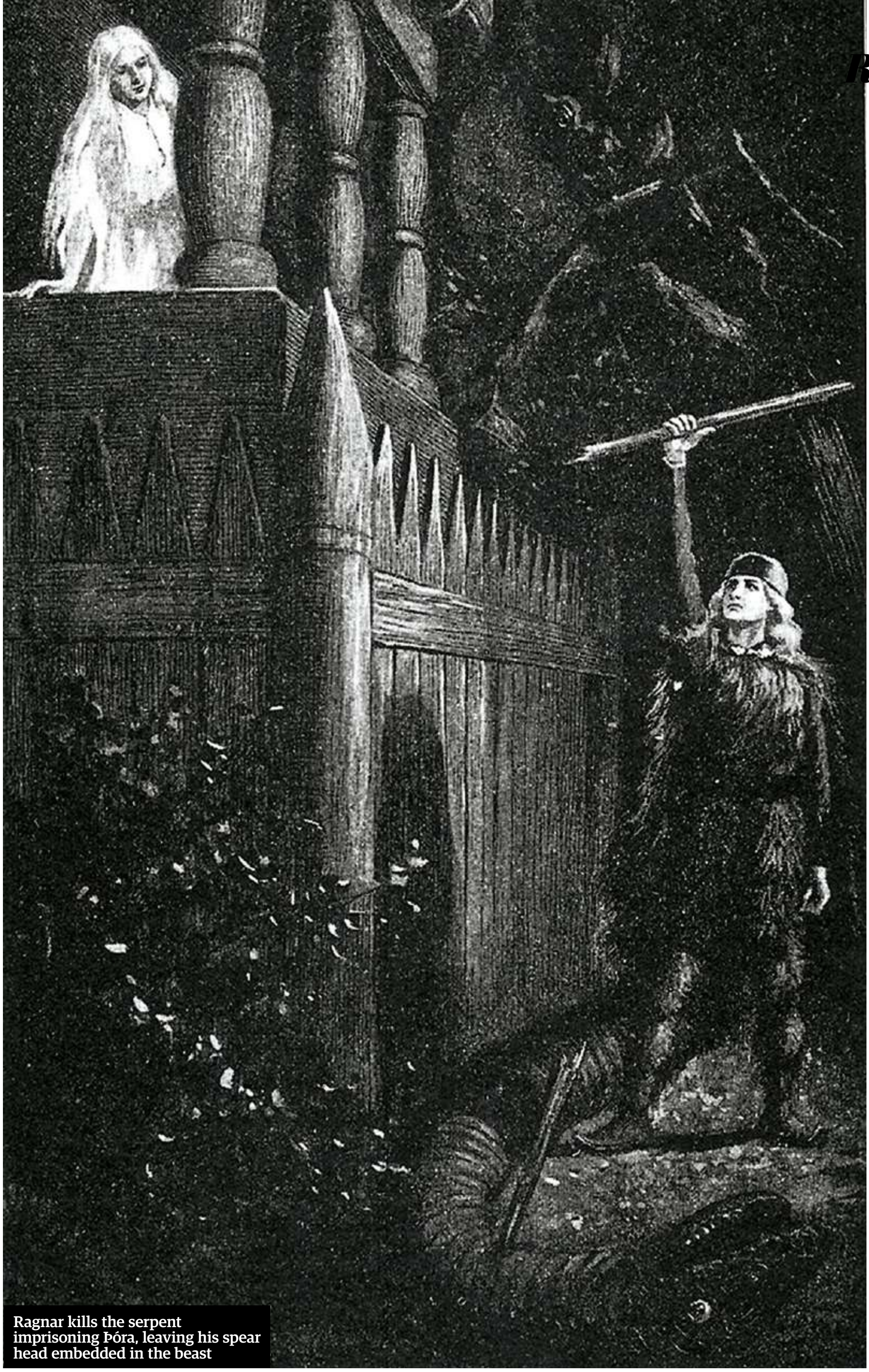
While Heimir slept, Grima set to her tasks, but she was too excited to do much. So when Áke, her husband, came home, he found the house unswept, the fire unbanked, and the animals not fed.

Áke looked round, then looked to sharp-eyed Grima and said, "You must be very happy. For every day, I work, chopping wood and hauling it home until my fingers bleed while you sit by the fire and do nothing."

Then sharp-tongued Grima said, "Would you like to do the work of a moment and, by that work, keep us fat and contented all the rest of our lives?"

"What work is that, old woman?" asked Áke.

"A man came to our farm today. An old man, a beggar he said. But I saw, with these sharp eyes, the gold glint from his finger and gold cloth in his harp. He is very old but I think he must have been a great warrior when he was young. I put him in the barley barn and he is lying there." Grima looked at her husband, and the thought of what she planned to do glinted in her eyes. "Fast asleep," she added.



Ragnar kills the serpent imprisoning Þóra, leaving his spear head embedded in the beast

But Áke shook his head. "No. No. I will not do this thing that you ask."

Sharp-tongued Grima cut him with her tongue. "Why did I marry a weakling? My mother told me to marry Svein. He wouldn't have hesitated. If you won't kill him, Áke, then so help me, I'll take the beggar man for my husband and we'll drive you out. You weren't here when he came: you didn't hear the honey words he poured over me. But I would not listen – I vowed to stay true to my husband. Much good that does me! Mark this, Áke, and mark it well: I'll take him to my bed and kill you if you don't take this chance." Grima put her hand on Áke's arm. "We won't get another chance like this, Áke," the woman wheedled, cunningly.

Then Áke nodded his head and he took his axe and sharpened it. Grima brought Áke to where Heimir lay, the harp by his side. He was snoring.

"Do it!" whispered Grima. "But run away after you strike, lest he lay hand on you." Then Grima took the harp and ran back to the farmhouse.

Áke took his axe and stood beside the sleeping, snoring Heimir. He raised his axe and brought it down but, striking, the axe caught on bone and flew from his hands. Heimir roared from his sleep, limbs thrashing, and Áke fled from the barn. But the blow was deep, a death blow, although such were Heimir's death throes that the whole barn came down.

Áke found Grima in the farmhouse with the harp. "It's done," he said.

"We'll be rich," said Grima. "Mark my words."

But the old man shook his head. "This won't end well. His blood will bring down blood on us."

"Pah," said the old lady. And she opened the harp.

But, inside, they found a little girl, although there was also gold.

"This will end badly," said Áke.

"It's true," said Grima, "she is not what I expected. Who are you?" But to whatever question they asked, Aslaug gave no answer. It was as if the young girl had no speech.

"This is bad," said Áke.

"Nonsense," said Grima. "I need some help around the house. She will be called Kráka, after my mother, and I will simply say, if anyone asks us, that she is our own daughter."

"No one will believe you," said Áke. "We're both so ugly. No one will believe Kráka is our daughter."

"I will make her ugly," said Grima. "I will shave her head, and tar it, and dress her in rags, so people will think she is my daughter. Besides, husband, don't you remember how beautiful I was in my youth?"

Áke looked at her. "No," he said.

"Oh, shut up," said Grima. And she set the girl to doing all the hardest chores on the farm. There Kráka grew up, in poverty and silence.

In Gautland there was a jarl named Harrud. He was wealthy and powerful, and he had a daughter named Þóra. Of all women she was the most beautiful and her manner was as lovely and gracious as her appearance. Her nickname was Fortress-Hart, for she excelled other women as the deer excels other animals. Harrud doted on his daughter, and had a bower made for her use, near his hall. Every day Harrud would send Þóra a gift. One day he sent her a little snake of great beauty. Þóra liked the snake and put it in a box with a piece of gold for its bed. But at once the snake began to grow, so that within a few days it was too big for its box, and it lay curled round it. Once out of the box, the snake grew quicker, so that it soon lay wrapped around Þóra's bower and none might enter or leave save only the man who brought the serpent its food: a whole ox. The gold beneath the snake grew with it too, so that it lay upon a great hoard. Then Harrud swore an oath that whatever man killed the snake and freed Þóra would have Þóra as his wife and the snake's gold as her dowry. Many men heard this, but none dared to face the serpent, for it had grown very great indeed.

The king of Denmark was Sigurd Hring. His fame was great, for he had killed Harald Wartooth at the battle of Brávellir.

Ragnar was the son of Sigurd. He was a giant among men, handsome, feared by his enemies and beloved of his friends. He had already gathered men to his warship and earned a reputation as a great warrior when he heard of the promise Jarl Herrud had made. But Ragnar made no oath, nor did he talk of the serpent that had imprisoned Þóra. Instead, he had some clothes made: shaggy trousers and a shaggy cape, which he boiled in tar. Then he sailed to Gautland and pulled his warship up on a beach not far from Jarl Harrud's hall. But Ragnar did not go to greet the jarl that night. Instead, he woke early, before anyone else had got up, and Ragnar put on the tar-covered trousers and cape he had made, and he took a spear from the rack. Climbing down from his ship, Ragnar rolled on the beach, covering his trousers and cloak in sand. Then he removed the rivet holding the spear head on its shaft.

Ragnar went through the dawn to the jarl's hall. All were sleeping there. Ragnar went to Þóra's bower. He saw the serpent coiled round it, asleep. At once, he stabbed it with the spear. Pulling the spear out, he stabbed again, cutting through the serpent's spine, and he twisted the spear so the spear head broke off.

In its death throes, a stream of acid blood gushed from the serpent, striking Ragnar. But the sandy cloak and shaggy trousers protected him from the deadly blood.

Þóra, wakened by the death agony of the serpent, saw a hooded man striding away and she called after him. But Ragnar did not turn, and answered in riddles, before walking away.

Þóra wondered who the man might be who had killed the serpent and freed her: could such a giant be a man? When Jarl Harrud, wakened by the serpent's death thrashing, came, he found the spear point embedded in the animal's spine but so great was its size that Harrud too wondered if a man could have wielded such a weapon.

Then Þóra advised her father to call a great assembly of the people. For whoever had killed the serpent would carry the shaft that fitted the spear head that had slain the snake.

Ragnar and his men heard the call to assembly and went to it, sitting apart from the other men.

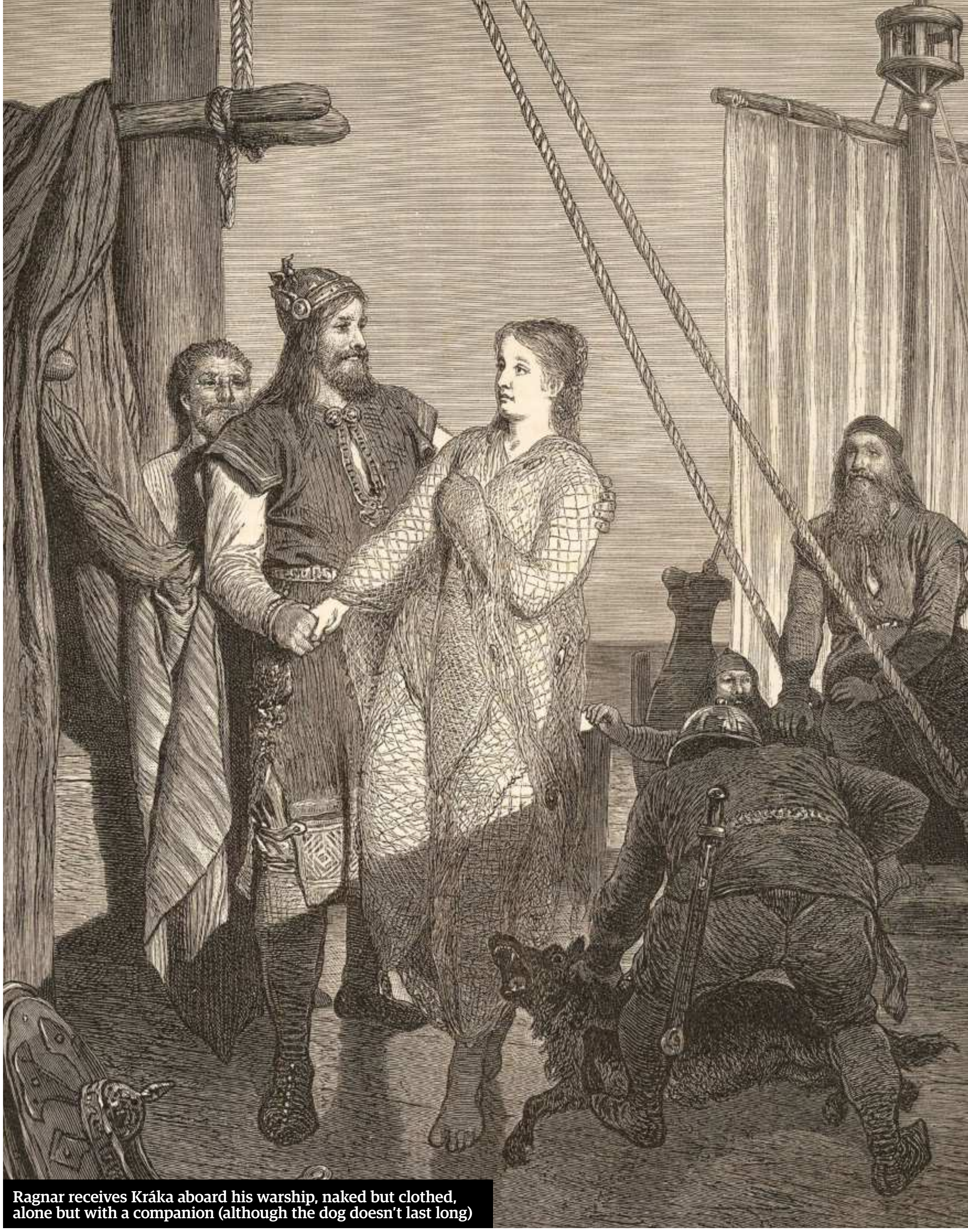
Jarl Harrud stood and spoke to his people. "The snake that held my daughter captive is dead and the man who killed it left in the beast its death. Let he who wielded that spear bring it forward and I shall keep my promise to him, whatever his degree." Many men tried, but no one had a spear shaft that matched the spear head.

Then Ragnar stood forth, and claimed the spear was his, and fitted the spear head to the shaft he carried. News of this deed spread through all the Northlands and beyond; Ragnar's name was sung from the white north to Miklagard itself. Jarl Harrud, right glad at so worthy a match, gave Þóra to be Ragnar's wife, and he took her home to Denmark. Ragnar loved Þóra and she gave him two sons, Eirek and Agnar. They grew to be great men.

But then Þóra took sick and died. In his grief, Ragnar put aside his kingdom, giving it to the keeping of others, and to still his sorrow he took his warship and went viking.

One morning when they were anchored in a small inlet, Ragnar's men woke early and took the rowing boat and rowed to land to bake bread. On the beach, they saw a farm not far away and the men took their wheat to the farm so that they might use its oven. An old woman greeted them, chewing her breakfast though she had no teeth. The men asked her name and the old lady replied to them, "My name is Grima. Who are you?"

"We are the men of the great Ragnar Loðbrók. Now help us bake his bread."


Ragnar receives Kráka aboard his warship, naked but clothed, alone but with a companion (although the dog doesn't last long)

> "I stand before you naked yet clothed, neither hungry nor full, alone but with a companion"

But the old woman held up her hands. Her fingers were twisted and bent. "These old hands can't do such hard work. But I have a daughter who can do the baking for you. Her name is Kráka, but she has grown so headstrong I can barely control her. Ask her yourself when she gets back."

Kráka had taken the cattle to water in the morning. But as she watered the cattle, she had seen the great ship, moored in the inlet, with painted shields lining its sides and the painted head of a great serpent at its prow. Seeing the ship, Kráka undressed and washed herself, despite Grima having forbidden it. Then she brushed her golden hair that had grown long, hanging down to the ground. For few people came to Spangareid and, with so few visitors, Grima had grown lazy and stopped shaving Kráka's head.

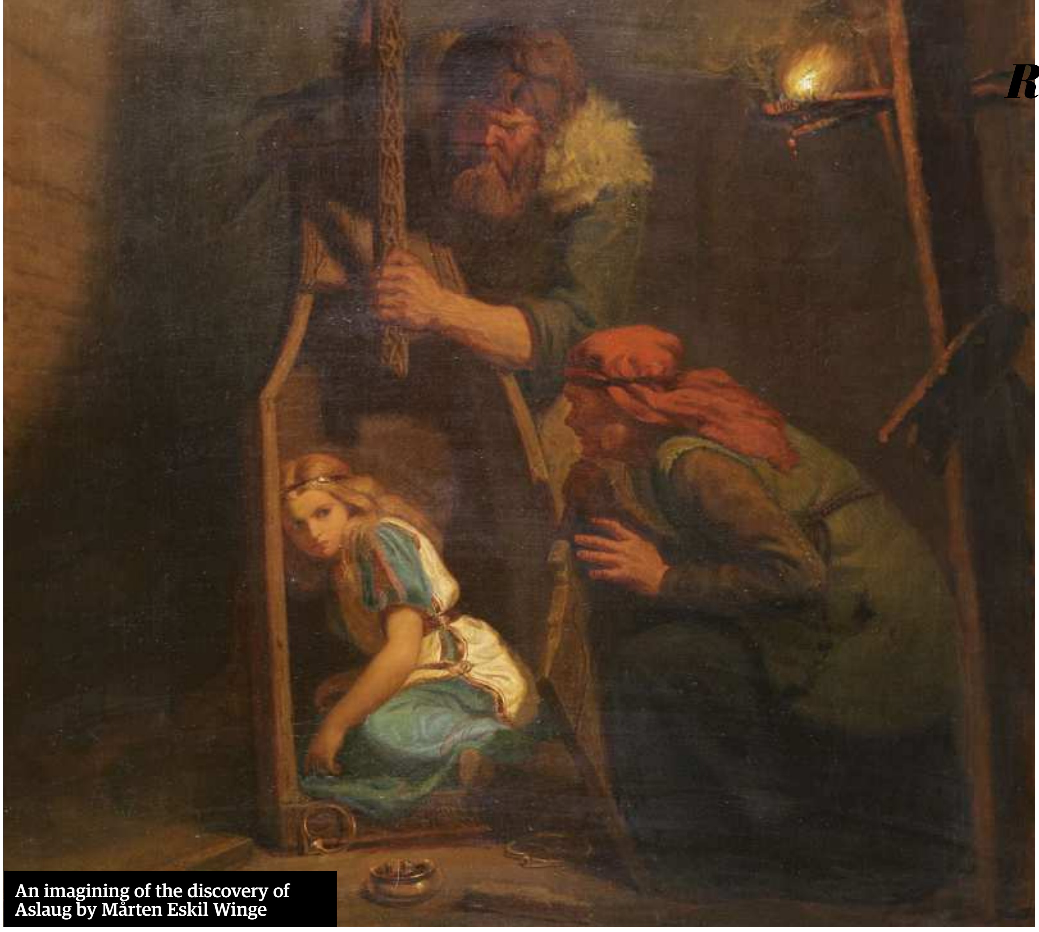
Leading the cattle, Kráka came home. And the men, bent over the fire, stopped what they were doing when they saw her and they turned to Grima and asked, "Is this your daughter?"

"She is," said Grima.

"How can that be," said the men, "when she is so beautiful and you are so ugly?"

"Don't judge this old woman in her age: I was a beauty too when I was young."

The men asked Kráka to help them bake the bread, telling her to knead the dough into loaves that they would then bake. Kráka bent over the dough, kneading it, then handing it to the men to bake. But the men could not stop turning to stare at her, so that they burned all the bread as they baked it. With the burnt bread, they returned to the ship. But



An imagining of the discovery of Aslaug by Mårten Eskil Winge

when they served the bread to the crew, the crew complained that it was burnt.

"You had one task," said Ragnar, who was hungry. "You could not even do that."

"It's not our fault," said the men. "There was this woman there, and she was so beautiful we could not stop staring at her, and so we burned the bread."

"No woman is as beautiful as Þóra," said Ragnar and his voice was low and threatening.

But the men did not hear the threat and protested all the more that the woman they had seen was indeed more beautiful than Þóra.

Then Ragnar spoke. "I will send other men and they will bring back report of this woman of whom you speak. If it be as you say, then I will pardon your incompetence. But if she be one whit less beautiful than Þóra, then you will die."

But when Ragnar's messengers tried to sail to the beach, the headwind was too great and they could not reach the land.

Denied, Ragnar's eagerness to see this maiden waxed and he told his men to give her this message: "If she is truly more beautiful than Þóra, then I want her for my bed. Tell her I will meet her, but that she must come to Ragnar Loðbrók naked but clothed, full yet hungry, alone and with company."

When the wind turned, Ragnar's messengers set sail. They landed and went up to the farmhouse and found Kráka waiting for them. Then they looked upon her and saw that the reports of her beauty were nothing less than the truth: she was indeed more beautiful than Þóra the Fair. The messengers bowed before her, and told her they came with word from Ragnar Loðbrók.

Grima, hearing Ragnar's message, cackled. "The famous Ragnar is mad. No maid may come to him in such a way."

But Kráka said, "I will come to your ship tomorrow, as the great Ragnar Loðbrók commands."

She watched the messengers sail back to Ragnar's warship, moored in the bay. And through the night, Kráka thought upon Ragnar's message. Then, when dawn was breaking, she went to see Áke. The old man was chopping wood. His dog, the only creature he loved, snarled at Kráka.

"Will you lend me your fishing net?" Kráka asked him. "I will catch us some fish for our lunch."

"Take it," said Áke. "Saves me getting wet and cold, standing in the bay."

"I'll need to take the dog too," said Kráka, "or the gulls will steal the fish."

"About time someone else did some work round here," said Áke. "Go with her, dog." The dog, disgruntled, followed Kráka back to the farmhouse. In the house, Kráka took an onion, then stripped her shift off and, naked, wrapped Áke's net around her body and draped her long hair over her breasts.

"Come, dog," Kráka said and, with the animal following, she went down to the bay. Grima saw her walking down to the beach: naked yet clothed, alone but with company. And she realised, suddenly, the wit of the girl who had been so long her drudge.

"But she is not full yet hungry."

Then Grima saw Kráka raise the onion to her lips, bite into it, chew and then spit it out.

"Ragnar will smell the onion and know she has eaten but is not sated."

Overnight, Ragnar, eager to see the fair maid, had moved his warship closer to the beach. Now, seeing her upon the strand, he called to her, asking if she was the one whom men said was fairer than Þóra the Fair.

"I come at the bidding of Ragnar, renowned through all the northlands - no maid would dare refuse him. As you commanded, I stand before you naked yet clothed, neither hungry nor full, alone but with a companion."

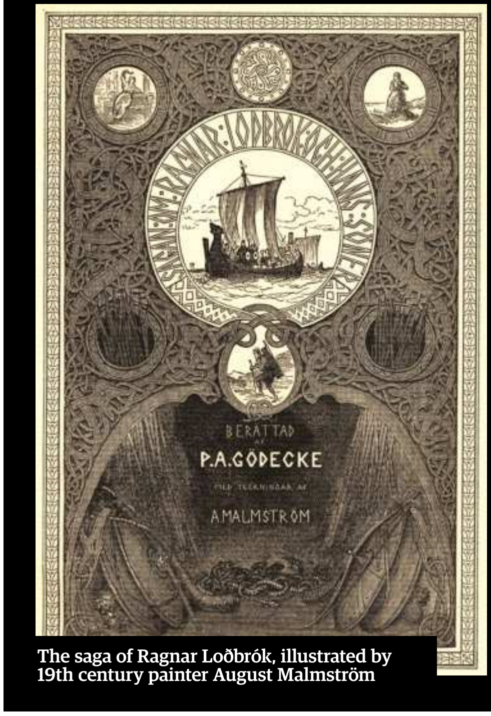
"Come to me," called Ragnar.

"I will come to you if you promise me and my companion safe conduct," said the brave maiden.

"You shall have it," said Ragnar. He sent his men to row her to the warship.

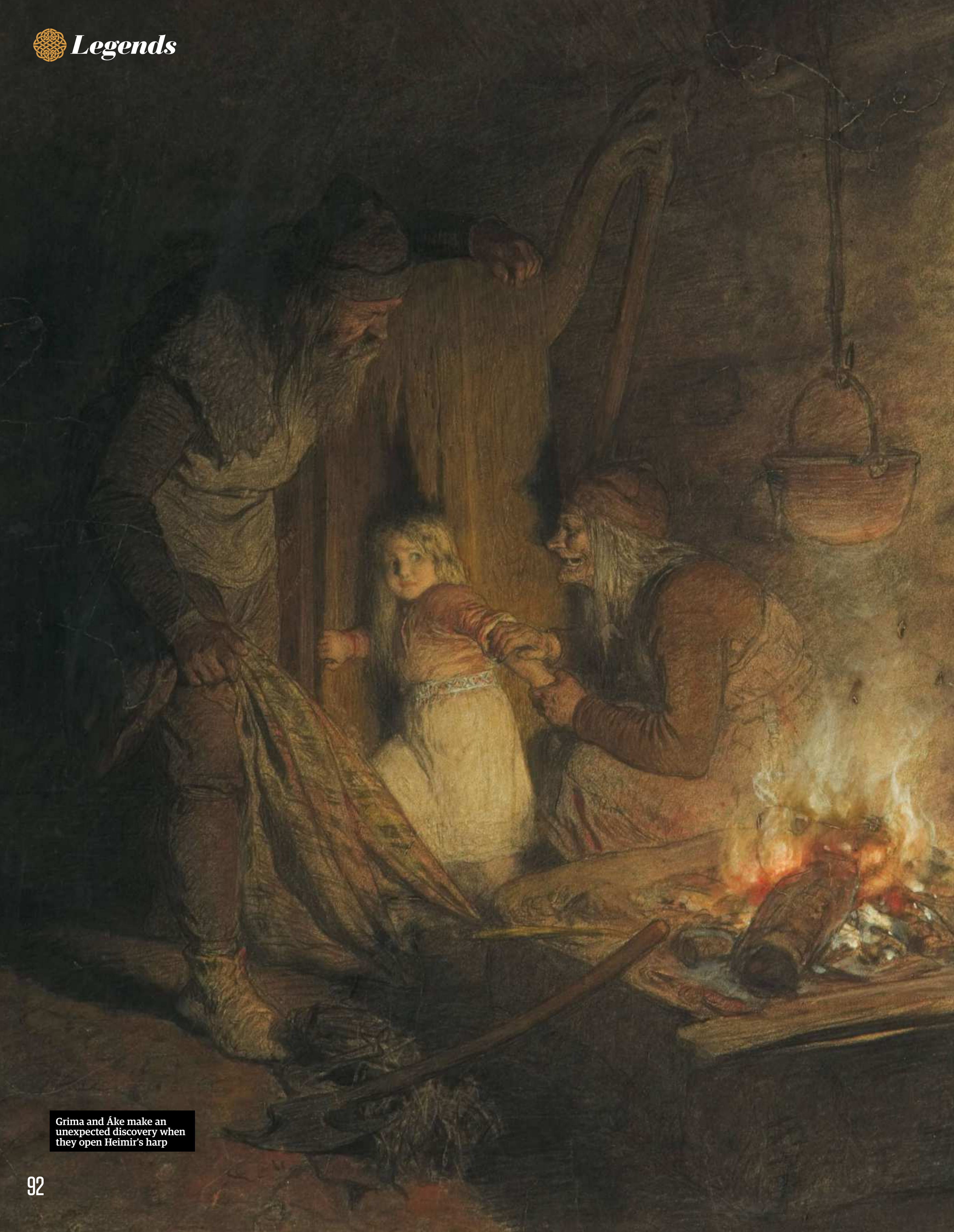
When Kráka stood before him, the blood rose in Ragnar Loðbrók as it had not done since Þóra, and

What are our sources for Ragnar?

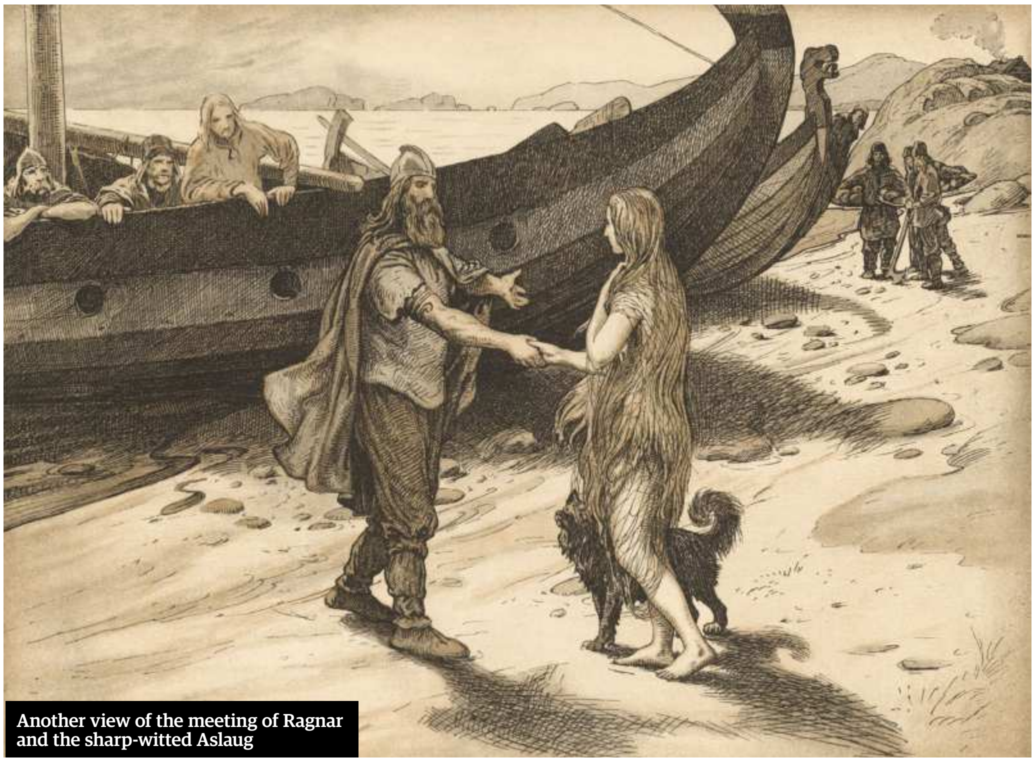


The saga of Ragnar Loðbrók, illustrated by 19th century painter August Malmström

Two manuscripts survive of the saga of Ragnar Loðbrók (*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*). They were written at the start of the 15th century but are thought to be retellings of a lost original written around 1230 CE. The manuscript presents Ragnar's saga as the direct continuation of *Völsunga saga*. This is the main source of the story of Ragnar, beginning with the story of how Aslaug is raised by Grima and Áke and concluding with the adventures of the sons of Loðbrók. The saga includes material telling of Ragnar's death and the revenge of his sons, which is recounted in the next chapter of this book, together with further material from the Tale of Ragnar's Sons (*Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*). Further tales of Ragnar were included in the lost *Skjöldunga saga* but, fortunately, large portions of *Skjöldunga saga* were included in a Latin version of the saga written by the Icelandic historian Arngrímr Jónsson in 1596. The *Sögubrot* ('saga fragment') is part of the lost *Skjöldunga saga* incorporating a little about Ragnar and more about his sons. Finally, the *Krákumál*, which is found in the same manuscript as the one containing *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* is a poem in the typical Norse form of a 'life poem' generally sung, ironically, as the protagonist is dying. As dying people are said to see their life pass before their eyes, the life poem also reviews the deeds of the dying hero, who thereby takes an inordinate amount of time to pass into death.



Grima and Åke make an unexpected discovery when they open Heimir's harp



Another view of the meeting of Ragnar and the sharp-witted Aslaug

"From today, each day that passes shall be worse than the day it follows, and the worst shall be your last"

he reached for her. But Áke's dog, seeing this, bit Ragnar's hand. Ragnar's men prised the animal off the king and strangled it. Thus died the only creature that Áke, the old man, loved.

Ragnar's wound was not deep, and he seated Kráka beside him while it was bound, and spoke with her.

"The kindness of a king might expect to be repaid by the embrace of a fair maid," he said, and as he spoke he had his men lay out rich cloth and gold and jewels before Kráka.

But the maid replied, "A true king keeps his word. You have promised me safe conduct: surely you will honour your oath and let me go hence, a maid intact."

Ragnar said to her, "I would wish that you come with me."

Kráka shook her head. "I know well you have set forth upon some task: you are a viking, and it may well be that when you return you will have forgotten me. But know this, O King. If, when you sail again past the farm at Spangareid, you remember me, then I will give thought again on coming with you."

Ragnar had his men bring forth a dress of woven gold, one that Þóra had worn, and laid it before Kráka.

But Kráka refused the gift. "What suits this maid, who drives the goats and cattle to water, are rags, not the fine clothes of Þóra the All-Fair. Nor can I wear such clothes while I live with Grima and Áke. But if you still wish me to go with you when you return, then send your men to call for me and I will listen to their words."

Ragnar swore oath upon his gold armband that he would not forget Kráka. But Kráka gave him no more answer, and Ragnar had his men take her back to shore. Then, with the wind shifting, Ragnar set sail.

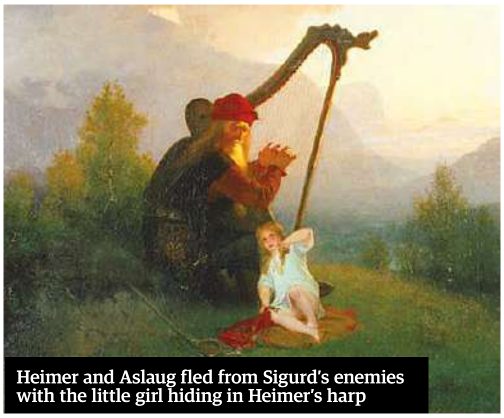
But always before his eyes was the memory of the maid who had come to him naked and yet clothed.

Then came the evening when, looking to the bay, Kráka saw the snake-prowed ship riding there, and men rowing to shore.

"The king has returned for you, as he swore," Ragnar's men told her.

"I will come with you in the morning," said Kráka. "I must make my farewell."

As the sun rose, Kráka went to where Grima and Áke lay abed, and spoke to her foster-parents in tones she had never used before.



Heimer and Aslaug fled from Sigurd's enemies with the little girl hiding in Heimer's harp

"You think me too young to remember what you did when first I came to you: how, though bound by guest law, you killed my foster-father, Heimir the Faithful. But I remember well." Kráka pointed at Áke. "I killed the dog, which alone you loved, for in truth none could love Grima Sharp-Tongue. I could have paid you back myself, killing you as you slept just as you killed Heimir, but in memory of the years I have lived with you I have stayed my hand. But know this: I now pronounce your doom. From today, each day that passes shall be worse than the day it follows, and the worst shall be your last. Now, we part forever."

Then Kráka went to where the boat waited for her. The king welcomed her but when night came and he would sleep with her, Kráka refused.

"Before I come to your bed, I would have a wedding feast, and a welcome in your land, that any heirs I bear for you be accepted by all."

Ragnar, hearing the wisdom of this, accepted, but urged his men to sail all the faster. Once at his kingdom, Ragnar ordered a great wedding feast and Ragnar and Kráka were married. But that night, when Ragnar would lie with her for the first time, Kráka put her finger to his lips.

"Wait," she said. "You have waited long, but wait just three nights more. For if we share a bed tonight, then my heart tells me the child I bear shall suffer for our impatience."

But Ragnar roared with laughter. "I have waited months, Kráka, months. I have given you gold and silver, my kingdom and my heart. I will wait for you no longer."

So that night they were joined, and their marriage healed the pain of Þóra's loss. But the telling of Kráka's heart proved true, for their first child, born of that first coupling, had gristle where his bones should have been, and he was named Ivar the Boneless. Though boundless in wit, his men had to bear him on their shields, for he could barely walk.

There were other sons born to Ragnar and Kráka: Björn and Halfdan. But some of Ragnar's men began to whisper that it was not fit for a king to be married to a peasant. Eystein, king of the Swedes, had a daughter of great beauty. Ragnar should forget Kráka and marry the King's daughter instead. But Kráka, hearing tell of this, told him the tale of how she was in fact Aslaug, the daughter of the hero Sigurd and the valkyrie Brynhild. But Ragnar would not believe her tale. Kráka said, "If my words be true, then the son who sits now in my belly will bear a mark like a snake lying in his eye, and you will call him Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye."

So it was. Kráka gave birth to a boy and when he opened his eyes for the first time, Ragnar saw there a mark like a coiled snake. And all men came to know that Kráka was, in truth, Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd Dragon Slayer and Brynhild the Fair.

The tale of their sons is told in the saga of the sons of Ragnar. It also tells of how Ragnar met his death when King Ælle cast him into a pit of serpents. There too is told how Ragnar's sons took terrible vengeance for the killing of their father, and many other things beside. But now, this tale of Ragnar Loðbrók is done.

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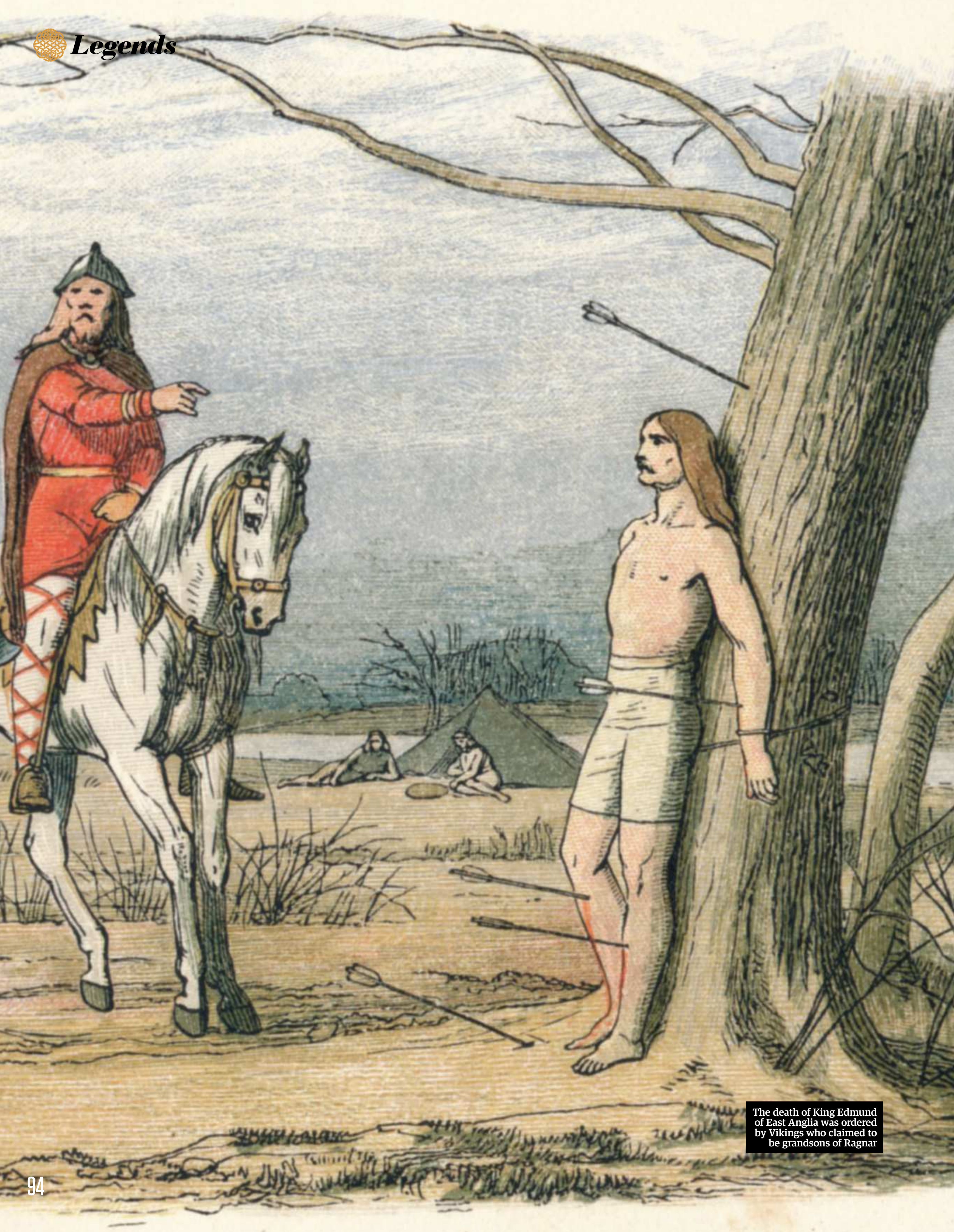


The death of King Edmund of East Anglia was ordered by Vikings who claimed to be grandsons of Ragnar

THE MIGHTY SONS OF RAGNAR LOÐBRÓK

Everybody knows the wondrous tales of Ragnar Loðbrók, the King of Sweden and Denmark, but the tales of his sons are equally thrilling

Written by Joanna Elphick

On hearing of the death of his father, King Sigurd Hring, Ragnar Loðbrók seized power over Denmark and Sweden, but his succession was not a smooth one. Kings from far and wide descended upon his kingdom with the intention of taking land from the young, inexperienced ruler. Loðbrók proved to be an accomplished fighter but he was lonely and longed for a wife to share his kingdom with. He heard that one of his vassals, Harrud, had offered his daughter's hand in return for an act of unimaginable bravery and decided to investigate.

When the beautiful Þóra Fortress-Hart was a little girl, Harrud gave the child a pet snake. Sadly, the creature turned out to be no ordinary serpent, rather it was a monstrous lindworm. In time, the wingless beast grew so large that it coiled around Þóra's shady garden, keeping everyone away from the young woman. The servants appeased the creature by feeding it an ox every day but eventually it became so vicious that nothing could calm it.

Ragnar made his way to West Gautland where the beast was lurking in the bower. Having disguised himself in shaggy trousers and a hooded cloak which he covered in tar and sand, he pulled out his spear and crept towards the lindworm. Ragnar's footsteps woke the beast who reared up and began blowing clouds of poison at the brave intruder. Having deflected the attack with his shield, Ragnar charged towards the serpent, piercing its heart with his spear before slicing off its head. Harrud was so grateful that he kept his promise and Þóra became Ragnar's wife.

With renewed strength and confidence Ragnar went home and defended his kingdom, ridding the country of his would-be usurpers. Þóra, meanwhile, bore her husband two sons, Eirik and Agnar, but their happiness was not to last. When the boys were no more than a few years old, their mother became sick and died. So Ragnar took a new wife, Aslaug, the daughter of Sigurd and the shield maiden Brynhild. The marriage was a good one, resulting in four sons, Ivar the Boneless, Björn Ironside, Halfdan Hvitserk and, finally, Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye.

The woeful deaths of Eirik and Agnar

Ragnar's sons were determined to prove themselves and become renowned in their own right. Between them they travelled far and wide, conquering Gotland, Oland, Zealand and Reidgotaland. Ivar, the most cunning of Aslaug's sons, set himself up at Hleidargard as their leader but this displeased King Ragnar who didn't appreciate his children trying to overshadow him. While he travelled over the Baltic with his army, Ragnar called upon his trusted friend, Eystein Beli, to protect Upper Sweden and guard the realm against his wrathful and tyrannous sons.

Eirik and Agnar brought their ships to Lake Malaren in order to speak with King Eystein. Eirik, they claimed, wanted to marry Eystein's daughter and demanded that he act as their vassal so that Ragnar's sons might rule Upper Sweden for themselves. The local chieftains refused to comply and a bloody battle ensued. Agnar and his army were slain and Eirik was finally captured but King Eystein was a good man who longed for peace, not war. He was sorry that Agnar had been killed and offered Eirik his freedom, great wealth and his daughter. But Eirik, who was hot-headed and ashamed of his defeat, asked to be executed at spear point and his body to be raised above all other fallen men on the battlefield. He asked that a message be sent to his stepmother, Aslaug, knowing full well that she would want to exact revenge, and then the deed was carried out. On hearing of their deaths, Aslaug gathered together her

THE LEGENDARY SONS OF LOĐBRÓK

The mythical father's historical children

IVAR RAGNARSSON

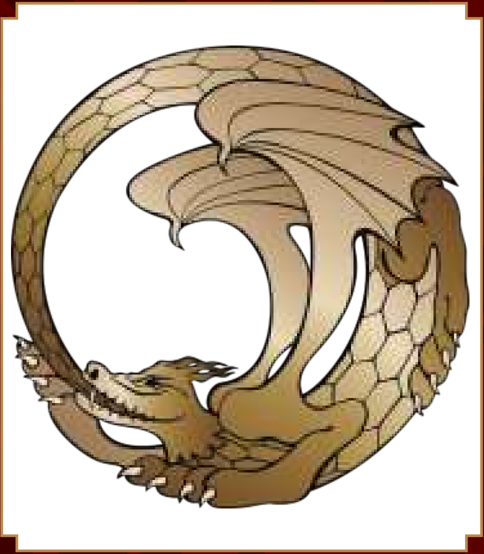
The cruel Viking warlord known as Ivar the Boneless was reputed to be a berserker with incredibly strong arms that carried a huge bow and arrows, much heavier than those of his men. Some historians believe his nickname suggests he was impotent, while others claim that it refers to a physical inflexibility that left him lame. His cruelty was legendary, particularly towards the Christians that he believed were ‘White Christ’ cowards.

HALFDAN RAGNARSSON

More commonly referred to as Hvitserk, or ‘White-Shirt’, Halfdan was one of the leaders of the Great Heathen Army alongside his brothers, although some historians claim that he was not the son of Ragnar but rather a Kievan prince called Askold, and that Hvitserk was his pet name. When asked how he wished to die, legend states that he chose to be burned alive at a stake of human remains.

BJÖRN RAGNARSSON

Known as a trickster, Björn 'Ironside' was inclined to use sneaky tactics if brute force looked to fail. It is said that he captured the town of Luni by sending word that he had died and on his deathbed, begged to be converted to Christianity. When the coffin was carried inside the walls of the town to be buried on consecrated ground, he leapt out and caught the people unaware. Ironside ruled Uppsala and it is thought that he became King of Sweden and founder of the House of Munsö.



SIGURD SNAKE-IN-THE-EYE

Sigurd 'Snake-in-the-Eye' was thought to be the closest to his father, Ragnar Lodbrok, having accompanied him on a dangerous journey to the Hellespont when he was a boy. He was born with a bizarre mark in his eye which was said to resemble the image of the ouroboros, a symbol depicting a snake biting its own tail. His mother, Aslaug, prophesised her son’s unusual eye before his birth, adding a mystical slant to him.

EIRIK AND AGNAR RAGNARSSON

Little is known of Ragnar Lodbrok’s first-born sons. It is thought that they were born circa 820 in Denmark and died, aged 30, in 850. Agnar died first, in battle, while his beloved brother chose death rather than face a cruel defeat. Although their own mother passed away at a young age, their stepmother, Aslaug, loved them as her own. They were fully accepted by their half-brothers who were said to have been devastated by their deaths. Ironside referred to them as ‘those men who made me merry’, and were quick to exact revenge upon those who ended their lives.

sons, who were filled with the desire to take revenge, for they all loved Eirik and Agnar as if they were full brothers. With ‘pluck, pith, tough heads and hands for vengeance’, they mustered an enormous army and travelled by ships to Sweden whist their mother, now called Randalin, took 1500 knights on horses. The battle raged for hours but eventually King Eystein fell and news of the siege spread across the lands.

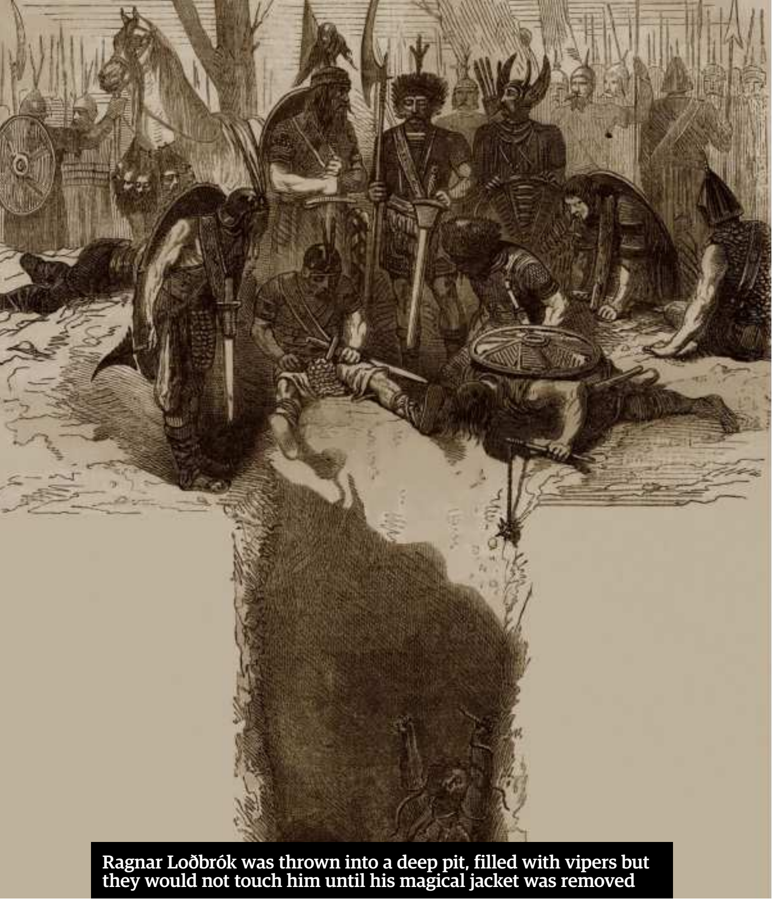
When Ragnar heard of the revenge attack, he was furious that he had not been consulted and feared that his own exploits might be forgotten in favour of his sons’ battles. In order to rectify this situation, he decided to sail to England in two merchant ships and conquer the country, but Aslaug warned him that this was a foolish idea since such ships were not appropriate for the English streams and shallows. Nonetheless, Ragnar sailed away only to wreck the vessels on the shoreline. Unperturbed, the King and his army swam to shore and proceeded to attack the English villagers.

The fall of Ragnar

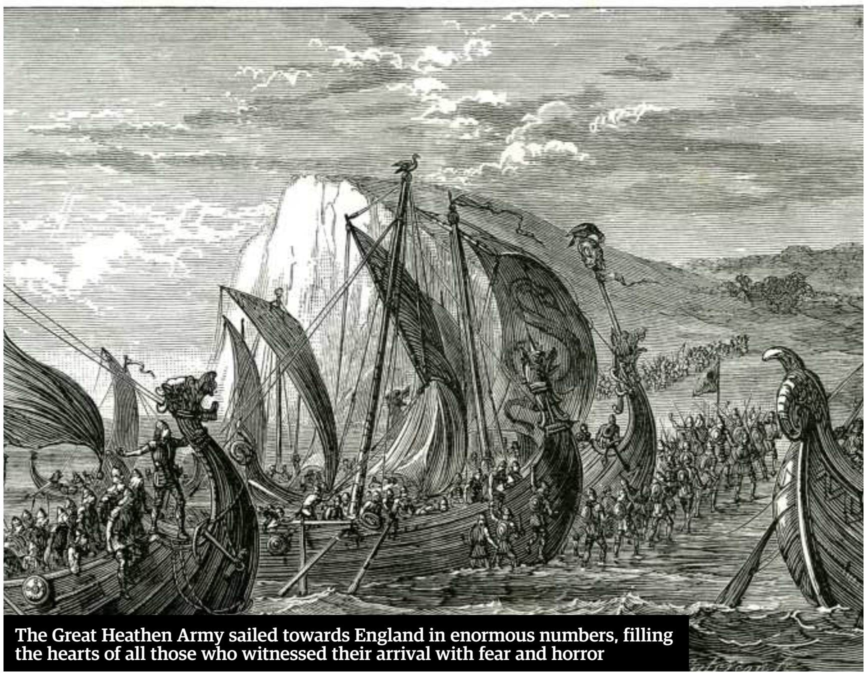
On hearing of Ragnar’s pillaging, King Ælle of Northumbria decided to gather together an impressive army and marched against him. A terrible battle followed and, although Ragnar was captured, the soldiers couldn’t kill him as the silken jacket that Aslaug had given him appeared to have magical properties and no sword could pierce it. They decided to throw the King into a snake-pit but, just as iron could not rip the jacket, the snakes would not touch the cloth. They merely slithered away into the corners of the pit. Ælle realised that the magical jacket was protecting Ragnar and had him stripped of his vestments. At once, the snakes leapt forward and sank their teeth into his skin, killing him.

Ragnar’s sons made their way to England. However, whilst the other brothers proceeded to take on Ælle’s army, Ivar held back, realising that the battle would be a fruitless one. The cunning Ivar was correct and when the battle was lost, the brothers were forced to retreat, leaving England for Denmark. Ivar, on the other hand, remained. He asked Ælle for some compensation for the loss of his father, suggesting no more land than that which could cover an ox’s hide. Ælle agreed but Ivar cut the skin in such a way that it became a long, long string that could encompass an entire city. Having obtained a large area of land, he laid the foundations of an impressive city, which ultimately became York, and began to make alliances with the neighbouring chieftains. Ivar gained the loyalty of the whole of England but he had not finished scheming just yet.

Ivar ordered his brothers to return with an army to overthrow Ælle but warned the King of the impending battle and, in this way, he led Ælle to believe that Ivar was still on his side. The English, who were now loyal to the sons of Ragnar, fought alongside the brothers and eventually King Ælle was captured. At last Ivar was in a position to exact his revenge for the death of his father. The eldest surviving brother was a cruel man who felt no mercy and it was with great relish that he invented the terrible torture of the blood eagle. Ælle’s back



Ragnar Loðbrók was thrown into a deep pit, filled with vipers but they would not touch him until his magical jacket was removed



The Great Heathen Army sailed towards England in enormous numbers, filling the hearts of all those who witnessed their arrival with fear and horror

'His lungs were pulled out of his body and spread out like fluttering wings'

was sliced open, his ribs were hacked away from the spine, salt was rubbed into the open wound and finally, his lungs were pulled out of his body and spread out like fluttering insect wings. King Ælle died in dreadful pain leaving Ivar the Boneless to rule over north-east England.

Ivar felt no love but took women when he wanted and, to this end, he had two sons out of wedlock. Yngvar and Husto were vicious like their father and were happy to obey his cruel orders, torturing King Edmund the Saint before taking his lands.

The brothers continued to ransack and pillage across England, Wales, France and Italy before stopping at the town of Luni where they turned back to Denmark. The realms were then divided between the men: Björn Ironside took Central Sweden and Uppsala, Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye took Zealand, Scania, Halland, Viken, Oslo, Agder, right up into the Norwegian Uplands, while Halfdan Hvitserk had Reidgotaland and Wendland. These mighty warriors were incredibly powerful indeed.

Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye married Ælle's daughter and had two children, who continued to rule over their father's lands. Ivar was the last of Ragnar's sons to die. He ruled England for many years before dying of old age, a peaceful passing for someone so cruel and full of unfathomable hatred.

As with many of the sagas, *Ragnarssona þáttr* is a heady mix of love, murder, thrilling adventure and brave deeds, but is any of it true? Sadly, it would be impossible to unpick fact from fiction with any certainty. The veracity of the legendary hero, Ragnar Loðbrók, is highly contested and his exploits are most likely an amalgamation of a number of people. The warrior, Reghnal, who raided Paris and then attacked England is the closest fit and the most probable historical figure. His death in a pit of vipers is equally suspect since he dies in a multitude of gruesome ways throughout the various collections of the old Norse sagas.

Ragnar's sons have more of a historical record. Graffiti carved into the rock of the chamber tomb of Maes Howe refers to them, citing them as 'what you would really call men'. The 'Great Heathen Army' was indeed led by brothers and there are accounts of a cruel king, unable to walk due to a crippling illness, that had to be carried into battle. Was this Ivar the Boneless? Probably, but we will never know for certain. Such warriors relied upon rumour and fear.

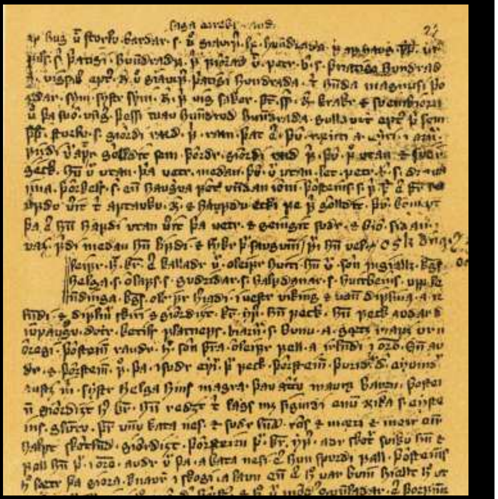
They created their own murderous folklore to travel before them and help them to defeat their unfortunate enemies. The actual extent of their exploits will never be known and, in truth, is it something we really want to know about? Perhaps it is better to enjoy the old Norse legends in all their wonder without too close inspection.

Haukr the Law Speaker

Icelandic Law Speaker and manuscript writer

Haukr Erlendsson was an Icelandic Lawspeaker who wrote a manuscript by the name of *Hauksbók*. The book was made up of a compilation of sagas, including *Ragnarssona þáttr*, in the 14th century. Born the son of Erlend Olafsson the Strong and Jorunn, a descendant of King Halfr of Hordaland, Hauk initially became a Law Speaker of Iceland in 1294, and later, in Norway, Oslo and the Gula þing. At some point after 1303, he joined the King's council. Both positions were considered extremely important, especially that of the Law Speaker, which was a legal office. Across Iceland, the Law Speaker was expected to counsel the people and recite the laws, often acting as an arbitrator. By the time Erlendsson took the post, the rules had altered and two royal Law Speakers were called upon to make important decisions and to influence the legal processes.

However, it is as the writer of the *Hauksbók* that he is best remembered. His work included an arithmetical treatise entitled *Algorismus*, a redaction of the famous *Landnámabók* and many sagas including *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Völuspa* and *Hervarar saga* alongside *Ragnarssona þáttr*. He also wrote *Hauk's Annals*, which was basically an autobiography of his life, and a popular handbook on Norse law. Some historians have suggested that Hauk only wrote the first part of *Hauksbók* and that the manuscript was completed by a variety of writers. However, his influence is abundantly clear since the book's title continues to be in his own name.



A yellow-stained page from the manuscript, *Hauksbók*, written in the 14th century by Haukr Erlendsson

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KINGS

The deeds of the medieval Norse kings were recorded for posterity by their court poets

100 The beginning of history
From legend to fact

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An incredible historical book

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A usurper tricks his way onto the throne of Norway

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A spiteful warrior-poet hell-bent on a quest for vengeance

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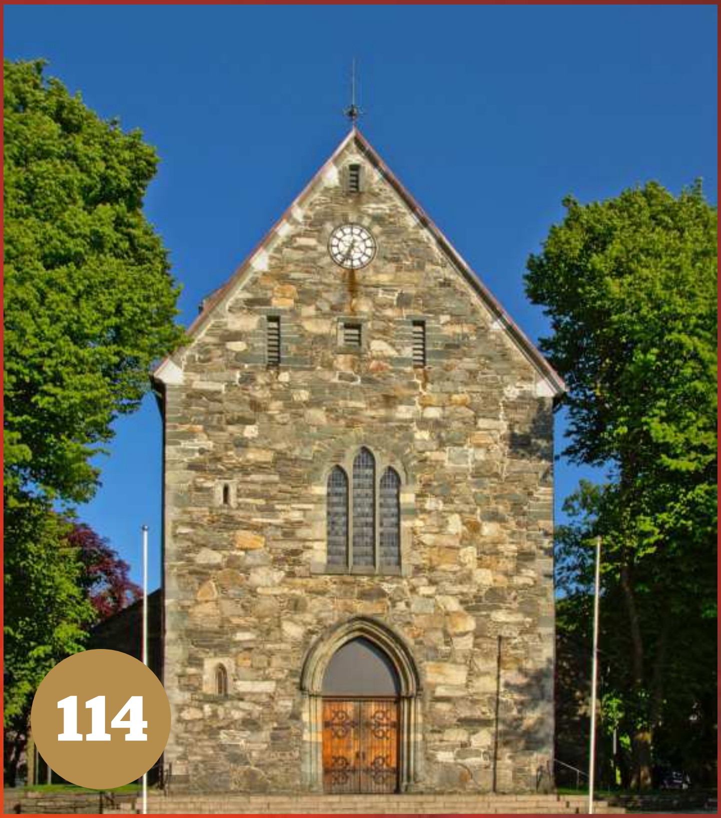
126 Sturlunga saga
The skalds themselves are immortalised in a saga

> **“A decade of conflict and diplomacy passed, until Harald became king”**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The saga of the skalds

The later sagas don't just preserve the history and legends of the ruling houses of Scandinavia. One saga takes as its main subject the Sturlung clan, the family from which one of Iceland's most famous skalds, Snorri Sturluson, was descended. Snorri had a dramatic life and a violent death, but he was a shrewd political operative, and he was far from the only member of his clan who toyed with the reins of power. The clan allied themselves with the rulers of Norway, who had titular rule over Iceland but often little control over the populace, and the sagas created or recorded by the Sturlungar – at least two of Snorri's nephews were well-known skalds in their own right – often demonstrate their bias towards the Norwegian royal house.

Cnut the Great is an example of a Viking king featured in both legends and history

THE BEGINNING OF HISTORY

As Viking skalds documented the annals of their kings, the focus of the sagas shifted from legend to historical record

You would be forgiven for thinking that, once the sagas move away from the legends of gods and heroes and into the real historicity of the Viking Age, the drama of these tales would take a back seat. But that's not the case. The kings recorded in the sagas claim to be able to trace their lineage back to gods and giants. Magic and mayhem still run in the royal bloodlines and will occasionally out in the form of a long-forgotten curse or prophecy, or an unexpected gift for sorcery. Most royal houses claim descent from Odin; those that don't claim it from the vanir god Freyr or from the elemental jötnar, and this belief in a larger-than-life genetic heritage persists well into the Christian age of the historical kings and their vassals. Saint Olaf works miracles from beyond the grave; Norna-Gest lives an enchanted life for over 300 years thanks to some Norn candle magic. Outside of the aristocracy, magic still runs deep in the veins of the common Norse: soothsayers still have the ability to see the future, witches still ride the winds and seas in spirit form, and rune magic still offers powerful protection against evil.

And yet, this is when magic begins to fade from the Viking world. The wild wizardry of the early sagas is replaced with allusions to pettier witcheries - fortune telling, cursing, blood magic - and Christian miracles. Giants and dragons can still be found, but in faraway lands beyond the River Volga, not along the trade routes of the known world. The Christianisation of Scandinavia is almost complete; the Vikings whose pagan ancestors fought to conquer England in the Great Heathen Army are now among the world's most vocal and well-travelled proselytisers of the god they call the White Christ.

The excitement of the sagas now comes from the thrill of battle between warring armies as kings vie with each other for land. Half-brothers fight for control of kingdoms, usurpers with little more than a strong arm and a good tale try their hands at a play for power, poison-tongued poets spread deceit and lies. This kind of astute political chicanery takes the place of the meddling of capricious gods in the earlier sagas, yet in the skilled language of the skalds, the pace and excitement never drops off.

The kings of the sagas can be broadly divided into two groups, legendary and historical, but there are some with one foot in each camp. The famous, archetypal Viking warrior-king Ragnar Loðbrók is, for want of any tangible evidence to the contrary, legendary. At least two of his sons, although over-exaggerated by exposure to their possible father's legend, are not - they're recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* of 895 as leaders of an invasion force against England. They are solid, historical figures, despite the fact that, if the sagas are to be believed, they are the grandsons of the mythical hero Sigurd and his valkyrie lover Brynhild.

For a long time after the Viking Age, the sagas were simply not believed. They were great stories, but that is all they were seen as. However, archaeological research over the past 50 years has uncovered evidence that stories that were viewed as fairytale fabrications and exaggerations - the discovery of distant lands beyond the Atlantic, for example - do in fact have a kernel of truth in them.

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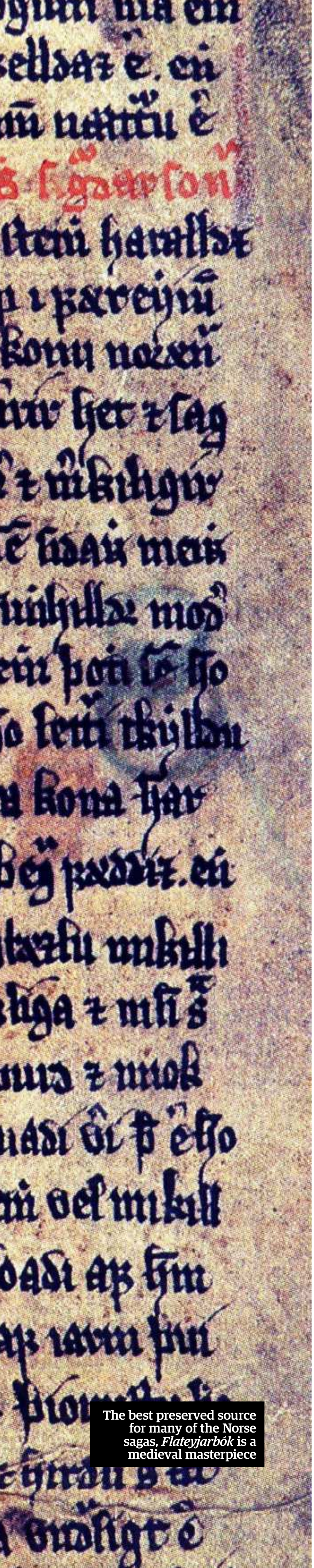


The best preserved source for many of the Norse sagas, *Flateyjarbók* is a medieval masterpiece

THE LOST CHRONICLES

A book from a faraway Icelandic island preserved many lost sagas. *Flateyjarbók* is really a sparkling gem in Norse literature

Written by Robert Murphy

The ancient pages have survived sea voyages, brutal winters, horrific fires and the treacherous Napoleonic War. They have been coveted and adored by kings and pored over by historians. And today the book is still bursting with the Gothic reds, golds and blues of medieval illustrations. Even though *Flateyjarbók* was written a couple of centuries after the so-called 'Age of the Vikings', the scriptures were based on many earlier texts.

Some of these, including the Kings' Sagas, have since been lost. Which makes *Flateyjarbók*'s 225 pages the best kept, fullest, brightest, finest-illustrated account of Norse life in Iceland, and it offers scintillating details about the legends and sagas from mainland, Viking, Europe.

The book was discovered on Flatey in the 17th century, which is why it takes the island's name. To give you an idea of the island's isolation, out in the western Icelandic bay of Breiðafjörður, you can only get there in the summer months when the ferry and hotel are in service. You can't bring your car; there is only one dusty road. The rest of the year just five people live on this freezing, two-kilometre outcrop. It seems like a good place to write a book. But *Flateyjarbók* was not written here. For three years in the 1300s, in an Augustinian monastery on mainland Iceland, sat a priest, Jón Þórðarson. He pored over historical books, refashioning them for what was then the modern age. He used spoken-word stories and poetry as references too. When Jón Þórðarson stopped writing, another priest took over.

Iceland looked a thousand miles east for inspiration, to the country that ruled this icy island: Norway. And *Flateyjarbók* goes back to the very beginnings of the master-state.

In one text, *Hversu Noregr byggðist*, it is written that Norwegian chieftains can trace their ancestry back to the giant Fornjótr and his sons who were the physical incarnations of Fire, Air and Water. It also describes how Fornjótr's descendant, Góa, was abducted. Her brothers Nórr and Górr made it their mission to search for her.

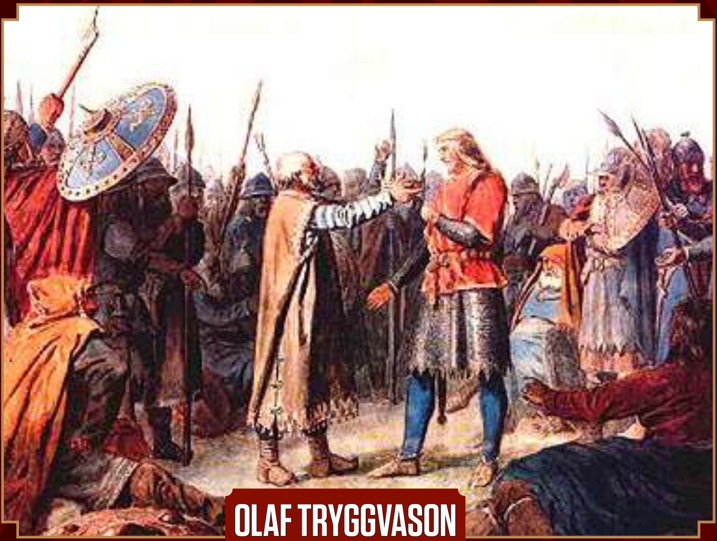
They headed south, conquering the land, before finding a king, Hrólfr I Berg, her abductor. Differing stories within *Flateyarbók* give differing accounts about what happened next. In one, Nórr and Hrólfr fight before coming to a settlement. In another, they are about to battle when Góa steps in and Hrólfr submits, swearing fealty to Nórr. Either way, Góa marries her abductor and Nórr weds Hrólfr's sister. The domains are divided between the brothers: Górr taking possession of the islands, becoming an antecedent of the 'Sea Kings'. Nórr rules the mainland and names it after himself: Norway.

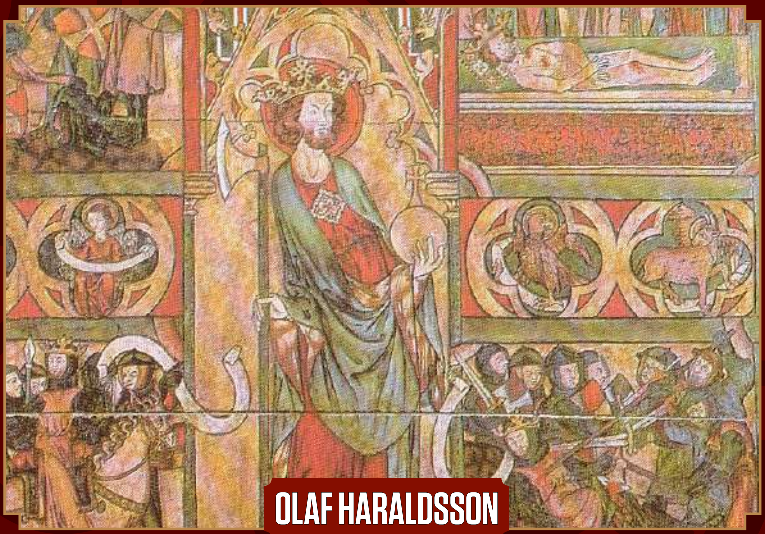
This is one of *Flateyjarbók*'s more fantastical stories. Others have factual groundings, although there is a constant whiff of Christian bias and propaganda. Well, Jón Þórðarson was a priest, wasn't he?

Two men, both called Olaf, both Christianising kings, feature in two of *Flateyjarbók*'s main stories. The longest saga features Olaf Tryggvason. It tells how he was born on the Orkney Islands, enemies murdered his Norwegian father before his birth,

THE TWO OLAFS

Two important kings whose sagas are featured in Flateyjarbók


OLAF TRYGGVASON


OLAF HARALDSSON

Olaf I ruled Norway for just about five years (995-1000) but his short reign belied its importance. He is said to have built the country's first Christian church.

Olaf was converted to Christianity beforehand, after landing on the Isles of Scilly. He heard that a seer (fortune-teller) was on the island and sent one of his men to pose as himself. But the seer was not fooled by this misleading fact.

He later told Olaf: "Thou wilt become a renowned king, and do celebrated deeds. Many men wilt thou bring to faith and baptism, and both to thy own and others' good."

According to the chronicles, when he returned to Norway, Olaf had to defeat its ruler, Jarl Haakon. Many of the aristocracy were rebelling against his regime. With the odds against him, Haakon hid with his slave in a pigsty. Olaf delivered a speech at that very farm, offering a reward for Haakon. Later, the ruler fell asleep and his slave decapitated him. When the slave presented Haakon's head, Olaf had the slave decapitated too.

During his reign, he forced many to convert to Christianity against their will. Today, a statue of Olaf stands in Trondheim, a city that he had founded.

One of *Flateyjarbók*'s main characters is Olaf II. His stories are recounted in *Olafs saga Helga*. Informally canonised, Olaf was the patron saint of the Varangians, the Viking guard of the Byzantine emperor, with a chapel in the distant city the Vikings called Miklagard (modern-day Istanbul).

Olaf's rule between 1015-1030 saw the establishment of church rules and the wide conversion of many Norwegians to Christianity. He used English missionaries for this.

Although he lost power and was defeated in battle, Olaf was canonised the year after his death. The cult of St Olaf developed after his illegitimate son Magnús Olafsson ascended the Norwegian throne in 1035. Many churches were dedicated to him, not only in Norway, but across Scandinavia.

He became the patron saint of Norway and his cult formed part of the independence movement and Romantic Nationalism movement in the mid-19th century as people argued the country should dissolve its union with Sweden.

Olaf's remains were buried in Trondheim. Today the city's Nidaros Cathedral, built in his honour, stands on his grave.

and he became a slave to Estonians, rising through violence, cunning and marriage to become a Slavic king. After his wife's death, his own conversion to Christianity and a second marriage, he returned to Norway to claim the throne in 995. He then, the saga says, set about converting Norwegians and folk in the country's extensive island network to Christianity. In his final fight, against a coalition of foes at the Battle of Svolder, he leapt from his mighty longboat into the ocean and was never seen again.

Another blockbuster saga in *Flateyjarbók* features Olaf Haraldsson, Norway's King Olaf II. Known to his subjects as Olaf the Fat during his reign between 1015 and 1028, *Flateyjarbók* gives him a more epic profile than the one he endured. *Flateyjarbók* claims Haraldsson was descended from an ancient Norwegian king and spent his early life raiding and marauding. He enjoyed victories over Estonians and Finns before heading south to England, where he pulled down London Bridge as part of a campaign to rid the city of the Danish Cnut the Great and restore Æthelred the Unready to the throne. He returned to Norway, having stopped in Normandy en route, being baptised there.

Back in his homeland, he fought and triumphed over King Sweyn Forkbeard, Cnut's father, who was trying to establish power. Olaf ascended the throne. A decade of Christianisation followed, before Olaf was killed in one of the most famous battles in Norwegian history: the Battle of Stiklestad. Olaf would later be made a saint.

As with all sagas, one must take the presented facts with a Viking-sized pinch of salt. There are no Anglo-Saxon sources that mention the young Norwegian who pulled down London Bridge and restored a Wessex king to the throne. And even though Olaf was canonised, historians doubt he was particularly Christian himself, showing greater joy in

"*Flateyjarbók* is the best kept, fullest, brightest, finest illustrated account of Norse life in Iceland, and it offers scintillating details about the legends and sagas"

greed than God. He was likely to have had a violent temperament. And the conversion of Norway to the religion, some historians argue, was due more to his English clergyman Grimketel, who established the country's Christian laws.

There is independent proof of at least some of the facts of a third *Flateyjarbók* saga: *Sverris saga*. At first glance you may think this history to be the most open to propaganda. King Sverre Sigurdsson was still alive when work started in 1185 (it was re-told in *Flateyjarbók* two centuries later.) While it details Sverri's victorious battles, it also lists his speeches: "Nought may send a man to his grave if his time is not come; and if he is doomed to die, nought may save him. To die in flight is the worst death of all."

But unlike many other sagas, there is at least some independent verification: letters between Norwegian bishops and the Pope. These letters agree, mostly, on the hard facts. So, while some of *Flateyjarbók*'s stories detail giants and anthropomorphised forms of the elements, other tales have genuine historical authority.

Flateyjarbók also sets out how the Atlantic Islands were settled: the *Færeyinga saga* details the history of the Faroe Islands, and how their folk escaped King Harald's harsh iron grip: "There was a man named Grímr Kamban; he first settled in Faroe. But in the days of Harald Fairhair many men fled before the king's overbearing." The *Orkneyinga saga* offers a history of the Orkney Islands, the *Grœnlendinga saga* the colonisation of Greenland by Erik the Red, and tales of his children's ventures to North America. These sagas, or certain more detailed passages of them, appear nowhere else as primary sources.

There are short stories too. *Norna-Gests páttr* tells of how the three Norns, women who rule the destiny of gods and men, visited him as a newborn to foretell his future. Two gave him good gifts but the third proclaimed the child would live no longer than the candle that flickered by the cradle. The eldest Norn extinguished the flame immediately and told Norna-Gest's mother to hide it.

The child grew and lived for 300 years, *Flateyjarbók* says. He took part in battles, always dodging death, and acquainted himself with kings. But when Olaf Tryggvason was king, Norna-Gest converted to Christianity. After doing so, Norna-Gest lit the candle. When the candle eventually failed, he died.

Nidaros Cathedral, the resting place of Saint Olaf

Although dominated by kings, *Flateyjarbók* has strong female characters too. In the poem *Hyndluljóð*, Ottar the Simple builds a shrine and makes offerings to the goddess Freyja. She answers his prayers, which are to find out his pedigree. She disguises Ottar as a boar and rides him to the völva (sorceress) Hyndla, who recites his ancestry, allowing him to gain complete access to his inheritance.

Flateyjarbók is a mix of the fantastical and factual. Its writers had struggles. Tucked away in a monastery in Iceland, they had few hard facts to go on. Many of the people they were writing about had lived centuries before. There was little evidence of anything. Just volumes of old books, written before - which themselves had dubious provenance. More than that, some of the stories in *Flateyjarbók* came to the writers through oral history. They had been embellished for public entertainment. So how much of this was true?

One modern historian says it would be like writing a history of World War II using Hollywood movies as facts. But it was no doubt heavily influenced by the oldest Icelandic writings - those of Sæmundr fróði. His Latin work on the history of the Norwegian kings is now lost, but the stories, which were reworked by *Flateyjarbók*'s writers, are preserved here.

The book was written when Iceland was governed from afar. The mainland had only been colonised for a few centuries. And the scribe-priests, Jón Þórðarson and his successor Magnús Þórhallsson, wanted to impress Norway, wanted to show the late 14th century Norwegian rulers that Iceland was as poetic and sophisticated as its older master-state.

The *Flateyjarbók* was commissioned by a wealthy Icelandic farmer, and writing stopped in 1394. What happened to it over the next 100 years or so isn't known, but it turned up a century later in the possession of a western Icelandic governor, who ordered extra pages to be written. The book was sent as a gift to the king of Denmark in 1656 and it remained in the Royal Library in the capital, surviving the Fire of Copenhagen in 1728 and a British bombardment of the city in 1807.

In 1971, after 300 years away, it returned to Iceland, bringing home the legends and sagas. It is now in the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík. The ancient book is currently away from public sight, being repaired. But it will be back in its splendid, Gothic glory to tell the stories and legends of the kings.

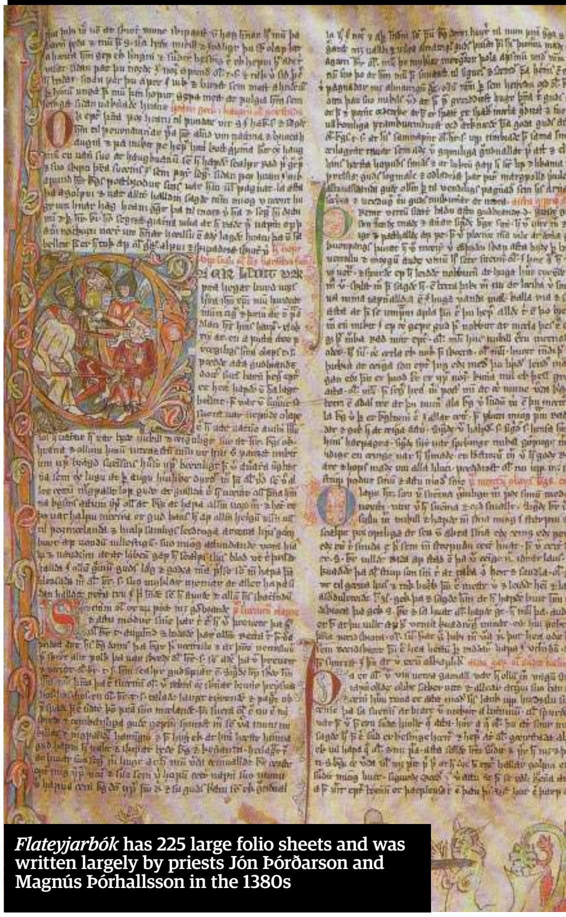
What does it tell us about itself?

This ancient tome, *Flateyjarbók*, continues to dazzle academics. "The size of it is astonishing… It is also a very prestigious manuscript because of the many illuminations. Seeing it open amazes you. The colours are still so clear. They are bright. And also the black ink is shiny and beautiful. So in many ways even though it's 600 years old, it doesn't look its age," says Dr Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir of the Árni Magnússon Institute, where the book is kept in Reykjavík.

Dr Óskarsdóttir says her favourite part of Flateyjarbók is *Fóstbrœðra saga*, which tells the story of two friends, a poet and a warrior. But she says the book itself is as fascinating as the stories it outlines, giving glimpses of what life was like in medieval Iceland.

"Firstly, it shows the two priests who wrote this manuscript, and their patron, had access to a lot of materials. There were all these sagas that had already been composed, that they could copy into the manuscript. It tells what a marvellous literary landscape there was. Secondly, it tells us there were people who very ambitious in the book's production. Because this is a gigantic undertaking to really collect all this material into one book.

"People have speculated that the manuscript was intended for a king. So you wonder whether it may tell you something about the political situation in Iceland at the time."



Flateyjarbók has 225 large folio sheets and was written largely by priests Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson in the 1380s

© Getty; Erik A. Drabløs

Olaf Tryggvason's colourful tale features heavily in *Heimskringla*. Some of it is even true

THE CIRCLE OF THE WORLD

When it comes to Norse sagas, *Heimskringla* is a true classic. Charting three centuries' worth of Norwegian history, it's rich with glory and drama

Written by Catherine Curzon

Heimskringla, which translates as "the circle of the world", is a collection of 16 sagas that tell the story of the Norse kings from the 9th century to the middle of the 12th century. First collected and published around 1220 by the Icelandic poet-chieftain Snorri Sturluson, they chart the development of the Norse people from the years of Viking exploration to their conversion to Christianity and beyond.

The collection opens with the saga of the Yngling dynasty, a story of the earliest Norwegian kings and their descent from the god, Odin. Snorri's Odin isn't a mythical figure but a real historical character, as gifted in magic as he is in military matters.

From his land of Asgard, the unbeaten Odin reigned supreme. He was an accomplished sorcerer who could shapeshift, control the elements and converse with the ravens that served as his spies, and thanks to these considerable powers and his mastery of berserk fury, which rendered his men invincible in battle, Odin soon became revered as a god. He left Asgard when Romans threatened his people and led them north over the Uplands in search of sanctuary. Though Odin's fame, wealth and power grew beyond imagining, he was a mortal man. Upon his death, *Heimskringla* plunges into the lives of the high kings who followed him.

The second saga is that of Halfdan the Black, the politically astute and militaristic king of Agder. Halfdan's life was one of campaign and conquest, dedicated to the expansion of his kingdom and dynasty, not to mention the kidnap and rescue of his wife! Halfdan's saga is generally considered to be one of myth, with little in the way of fact, filled with romance and adventure.

From myth to monarchy

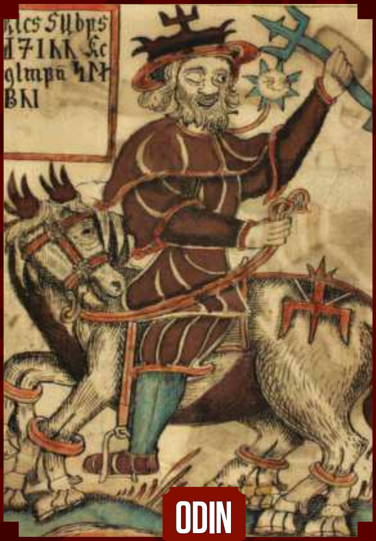
Harald Hårfager, or Fairhair, is the third subject of the book and, in Snorri's hands, the tale of the creation of the kingdom of Norway is one of high romance. Harald was the king of several scattered lands known as Vestfold and he longed to marry Gyda Eiriksdatter, the daughter of a neighbouring monarch. Gyda, however, had no interest in Harald until he could rightly call himself the king of all of Norway. Harald swore to give her what she asked and added another promise: he would neither cut nor comb his hair until he had succeeded.

A decade of conflict and diplomacy passed until 872, when a triumphant Harald finally became king of a united Norway. He cut and combed his hair then married Gyda, proving that he could get the girl in the end.

Heimskringla isn't just a story of romance and gods, but of the birth of a kingdom we still know today. Although Snorri wasn't dedicated to historical accuracy, his work chronicles the emergence of Scandinavia and provides valuable insight into the kings and the way in which they were presented as characters not of solid historical foundations, but as men of myth. Yet in this world of myth and heroes, there is fact, too, and we find it in the fourth saga, that of Haakon the Good, Fairhair's son.

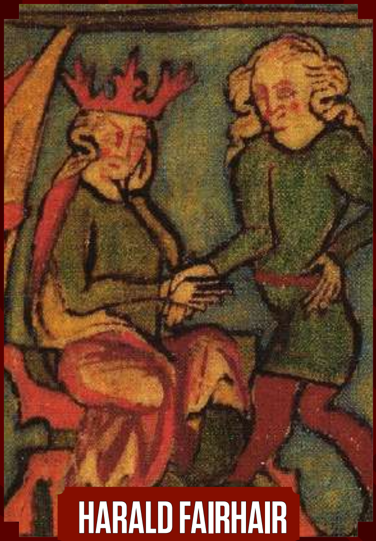
THE LEGENDS OF HEIMSKRINGLA

Who are the main players in this mighty saga?



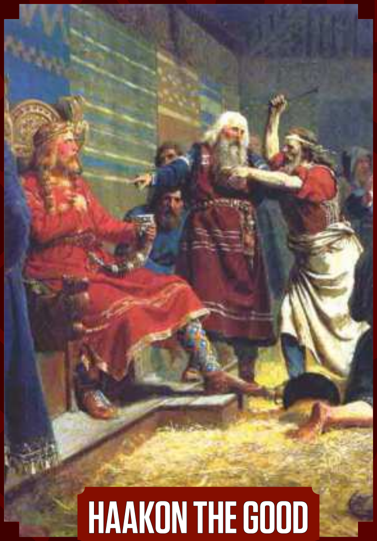
ODIN

As chief of Asgard, the Norse god Odin was part man, part myth. He was known for his immense power, both physical and magical, and was undefeated in battle. He gained much of his knowledge from the severed head of Mímir, a wise being who, in death, became one of Odin's most trusted advisors.



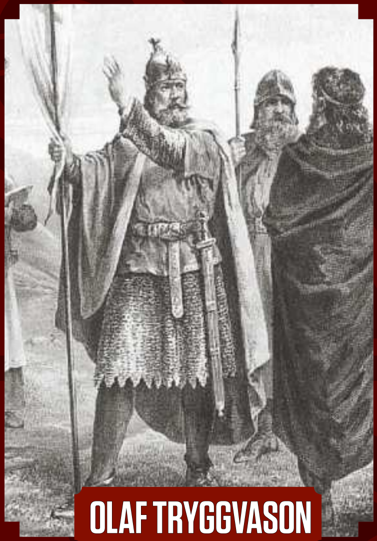
HARALD FAIRHAIR

The existence of Harald Fairhair does have basis in fact and he is recognised as the first King of Norway. Presented by Snorri as a romantic hero, Harald was inspired to unite Norway and rule there by Gyda Eiriksdatter, the woman he loved yet couldn't marry until the disparate Norwegian lands were united.



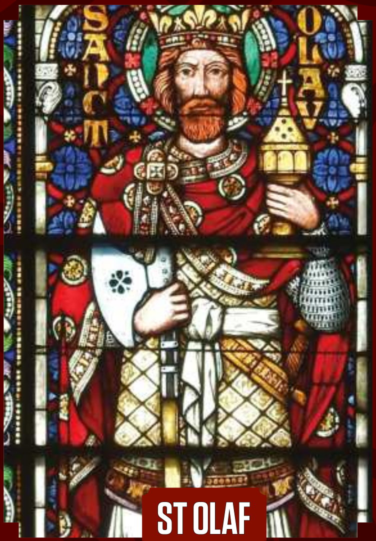
HAAKON THE GOOD

Haakon the Good is depicted in *Heimskringla* as the first man who attempted to bring Christianity to Norway, where the old Norse gods still reigned supreme. He enjoyed limited success in this quest, but he was able to see off the threat of his half-brother, the infamous Eric Bloodaxe.



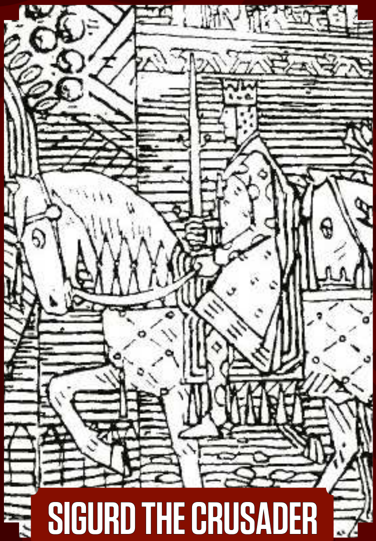
OLAF TRYGGVASON

Once again, fact meets romantic myth in the story of Olaf Tryggvason. After being sold into slavery and rescued by a quirk of fate, Olaf met a seer who predicted that he would become a Christian king. The cynical Olaf soon found the prophecy coming true and dedicated himself to spreading the gospel.



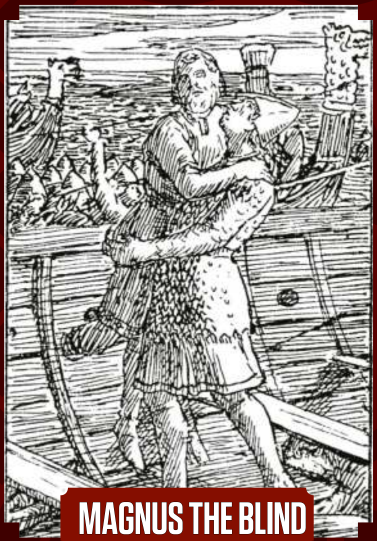
ST OLAF

As the central figure of *Heimskringla*, a whole separate saga was written to tell Olaf's remarkable story. In it, Olaf's body remained whole long after death and his hair and nails continued to grow at a normal rate. Olaf was venerated as a saint, and it was believed that a spring at the site of his grave could perform miracles.



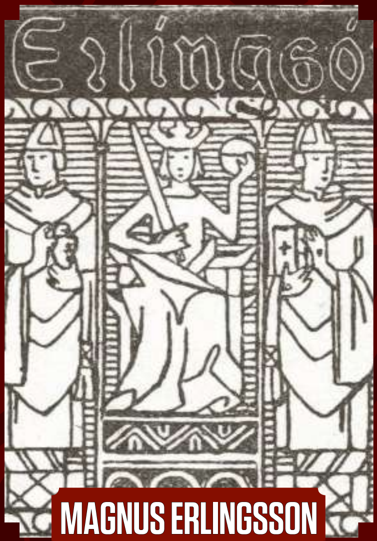
SIGURD THE CRUSADER

As his name suggests, Sigurd the Crusader achieved fame for his leadership of the historic Norwegian Crusade. As the first European king to visit the Holy Land, he made history and alliances on the journey. A popular ruler who presided over a prosperous land, Sigurd's death plunged Norway into a century of civil war.



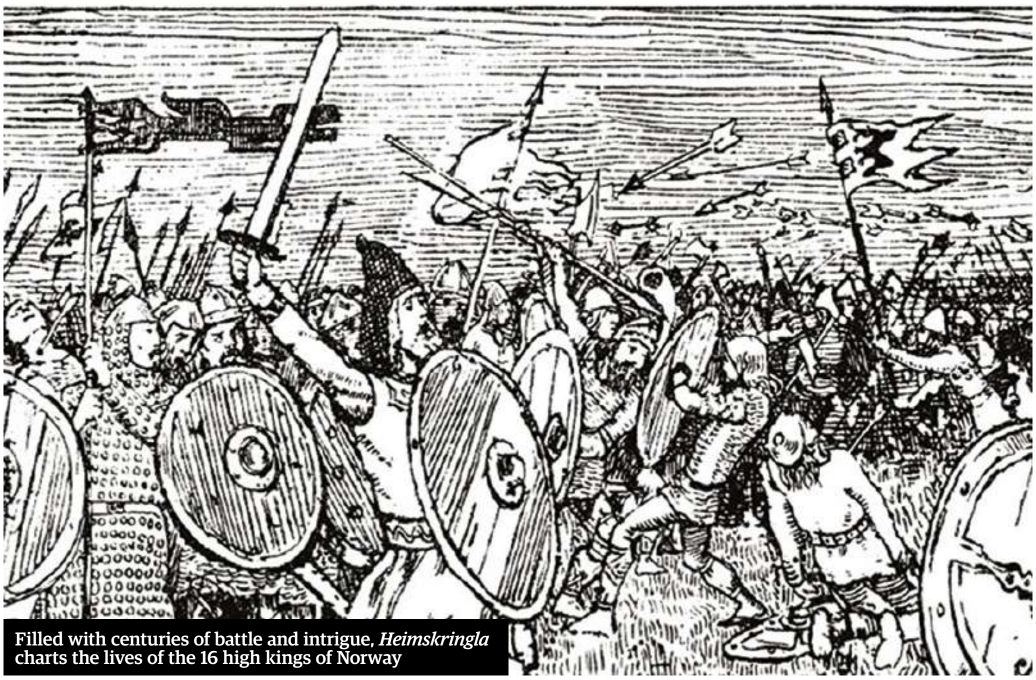
MAGNUS THE BLIND

Though Magnus the Blind's saga isn't the longest in *Heimskringla*, it admirably demonstrates the turmoil of the country's ongoing civil war. A political pawn, used by his allies and foes alike, Magnus suffered terrible punishment after he was captured in battle. Despite being mutilated by his enemies, he fought on to the last.



MAGNUS ERLINGSSON

The saga of Magnus Erlingsson closes *Heimskringla*. A king whilst still a young child, Magnus was certainly in thrall to his powerful and ambitious father, and by the time he reached adulthood he was more interested in women and fun than politics. *Heimskringla* ends with him victorious, ruling over a wealthy, united land.



Filled with centuries of battle and intrigue, *Heimskringla* charts the lives of the 16 high kings of Norway

> "Odin was an accomplished sorcerer who could shapeshift, control the elements and converse with ravens"

For his own protection, young Haakon was raised in England as a Christian until the death of Fairhair. When Haakon's half-brother, Eric Bloodaxe, seized the throne, Haakon returned to Norway armed with radical taxation policies that won influential Norwegians to his side and forced Eric to flee. Haakon was proclaimed king of Norway and attempted, with little success, to bring Christianity to the ancestral lands where he would reign for almost 30 years.

Though Eric Bloodaxe doesn't have his own entry in *Heimskringla*, the same can't be said for his son, Harald Greycloak. He joined his brothers in a battle against Haakon for the throne and, at Fitjar, Haakon made his last stand. The king died of his wounds and was succeeded by Greycloak and his brothers. Greycloak, however, was far from content to rest on his laurels and ruthlessly conquered neighbouring lands, putting his opponents to death. Thanks to him, Norway was able to take control of important and wealthy trade routes but such expansionism soon attracted enemies and, nine years after he won power, Greycloak was murdered during a trip to Denmark.

The next saga is that of King Olaf Tryggvason, a highly embroidered tale that begins with his birth in 963, not long after the death of his father, King Tryggvi Olafsson of Viken, alongside Haakon at Fitjar. Olaf's heavily pregnant mother, Astrid Eiriksdatter, was forced into hiding, fearing for her life. Once Olaf was born, she fled with him for the supposed sanctuary of Sweden. Here Astrid was betrayed and the Swedish king agreed to hand Olaf over to Greycloak, the very man who had slain his father. After a fight, the doughty twosome escaped and, with the help of Astrid's brother, Sigurd Eiriksson, sailed for the safety of Novgorod. But once again, their luck took a turn for the worse.

Slave to statesman

Astrid's ship was captured by Vikings and Olaf was sold into slavery in Estonia. Here he toiled for years until, out of the blue, Sigurd visited Estonia to collect taxes. He recognised his nephew and freed him, taking Olaf home to Novgorod. It was here that Olaf was able to find and kill the man who had enslaved him, launching his raiding career.

The saga follows Olaf's life from these early raids through years of conquer and consolidation until he became a statesman, battling for the reins of his own kingdom. When his beloved wife, Geira, died, Olaf returned to a life of sea raids and pillage, going as far as the Hebrides and Isles of Scilly. There he met a seer, who prophesied that Olaf would survive a mutiny, become a celebrated king and spread the Christian faith. Olaf, who worshipped the Norse gods, was perplexed by the prediction, but when his men rebelled and he was forced to fight them, he realised the truth of the seer's words and converted to Christianity.

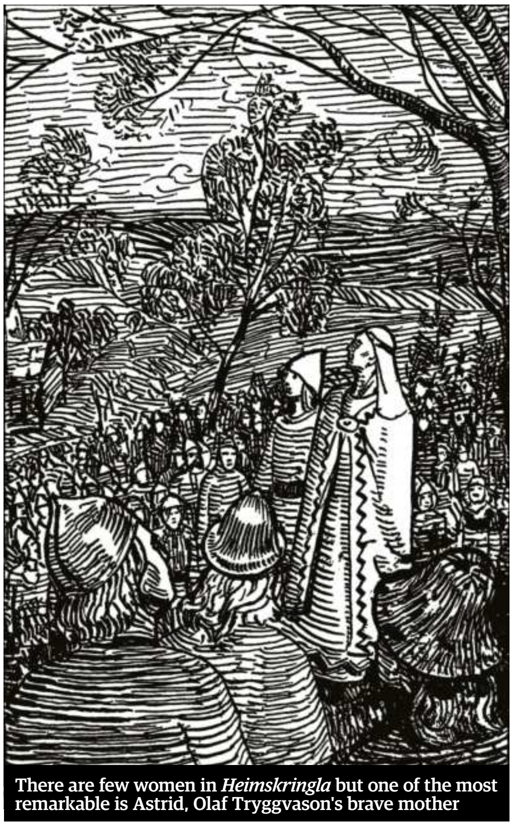
The newly converted Olaf sailed for England and there he met Gyda, the sister of Dublin's king Olaf Cuaran. After a heroic duel for her hand, Olaf and Gyda were married. The couple settled in Ireland and word spread to Norway of a Nordic king living overseas. Jarl Haakon, the unpopular ruler of Norway, was worried about this new development and rightly so, for Olaf was determined to win the crown that he believed was rightly his. Predictably, Olaf didn't settle down to a quiet married life for long.

When Olaf landed in Norway, the populace was ready to proclaim him king. The unfortunate Jarl Haakon, meanwhile, was hiding in a pigsty with his servant, Kark. A rich bounty was placed on the jarl's head and when he dozed off, Kark decapitated him. He took Jarl Haakon's severed head to the newly enthroned King Olaf and demanded his reward. Sickened by Kark's betrayal of his master, Olaf had him beheaded there and then.

With his position assured, Olaf travelled through Norway and into Denmark, preaching the Christian gospel and demanding that his people convert to Christianity. Sigrid the Haughty, Queen of Sweden, had no intention of converting despite the twice-widowed Olaf's wish to marry her. When he demanded that she be baptised, things took a turn for the worse and their not-so-romantic encounter ended in a physical confrontation!

Despite this hitch, Olaf sent conversion parties out to Iceland and baptised the Norse explorer Leif Eriksson before he made his famed journey to Greenland, where he took up Olaf's favourite pastime of spreading the Christian gospel. Yet Olaf wasn't without his enemies, and when he married Þyri Haraldsdóttir it earned him the fury of her brother, King Sweyn I of Denmark. Sweyn had already arranged for his sister's marriage to a heathen, Buislav, and the feud between Þyri's husband and brother erupted into a fierce naval conflict, the Battle of Svolder.

Commanding his warship, Ormen Lange (The Long Serpent), Olaf fought with ferocity, yet he was outnumbered. As Sweyn's men boarded his



There are few women in *Heimskringla* but one of the most remarkable is Astrid, Olaf Tryggvason's brave mother

The saga of Snorri Sturluson

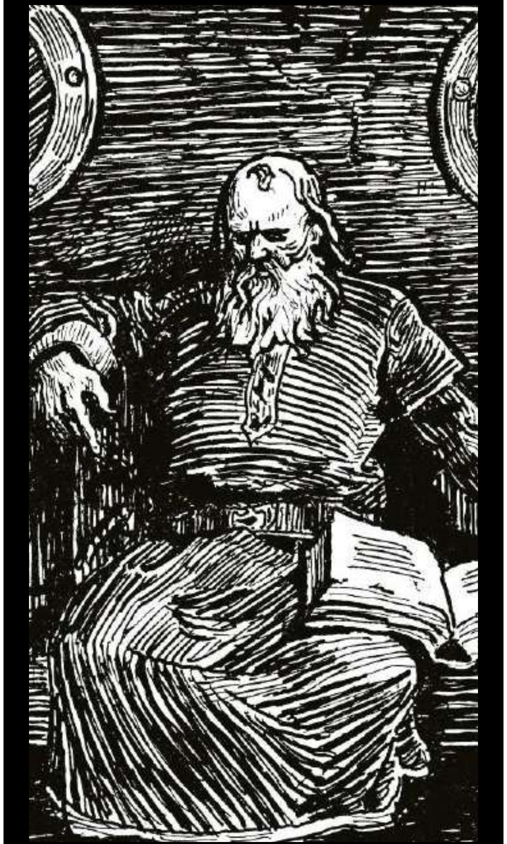
Born in 1179, Snorri was an Icelandic chieftain, politician and author, and wrote the epic *Heimskringla*

Heimskringla was the culmination of decades of work. For his inspiration, Snorri used not only tales passed down orally from generation to generation, but innumerable skaldic poems, many of which are quoted in the text. Additional sources included the earlier published sagas, *Fagrskinna*, *Morkinskinna* and *Hryggjarstykki*, which Snorri used extensively for later sagas.

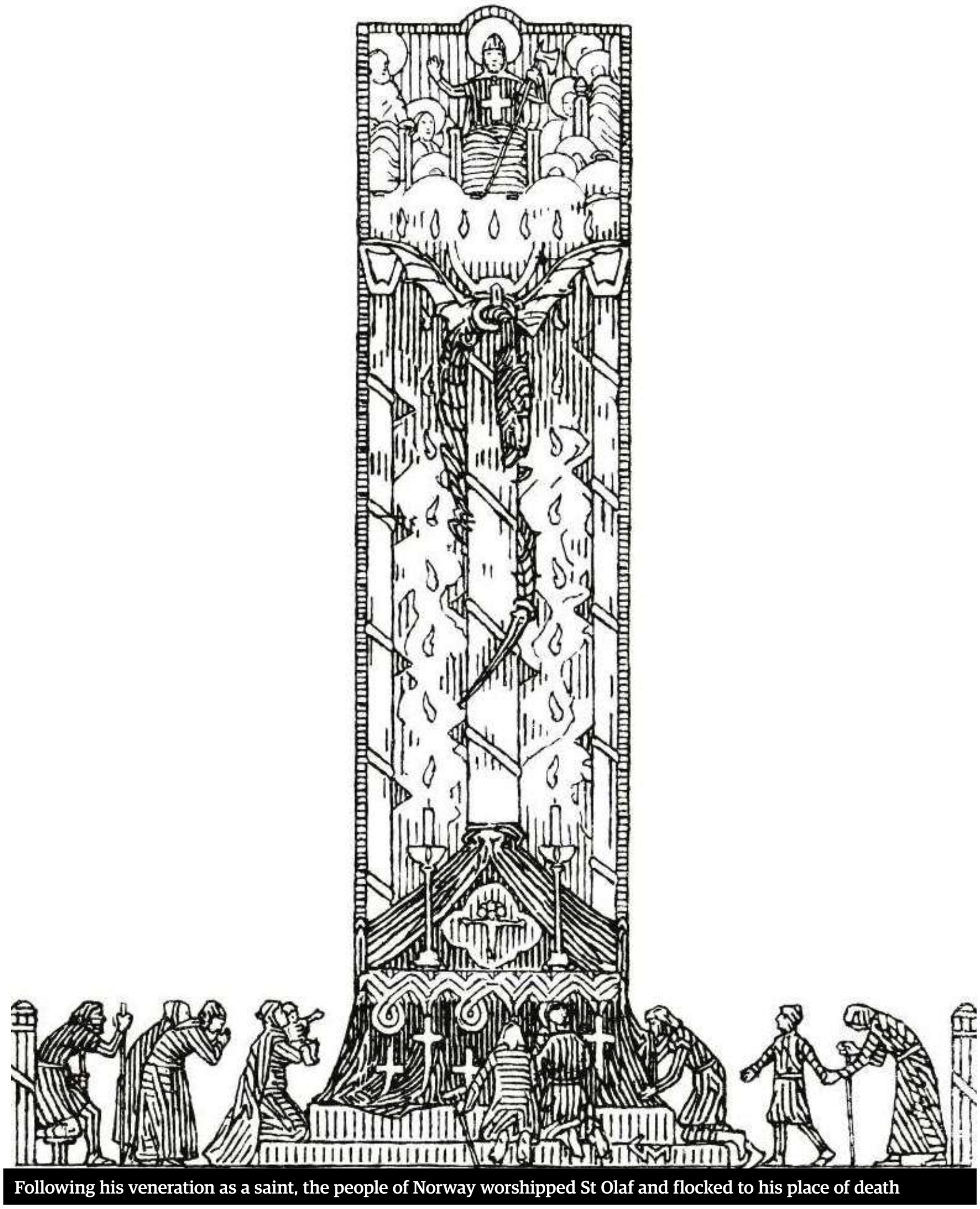
Snorri enjoyed enormous popularity in his homeland, where he served as Law Speaker of the Icelandic parliament. He wrote poetic tributes to the kings of Norway and was welcomed to the Norwegian court as an honoured guest, awarded vast riches and expensive gifts in shows of gratitude for his works.

Like so many of the characters in *Heimskringla*, however, Snorri ultimately met a violent death. After he attempted to unite the chiefs of Iceland under the king, Snorri earned the distrust of his fellow chieftains, who forced him into exile. He fled for Norway to find the land in turmoil, with the King Haakon IV and his regent, Skúli, vying for power. He allied with Skúli and, following Skúli's defeat, found himself an enemy of the king. Fearing reprisals, he returned to Iceland with a charge of treason hanging over his head in Norway.

Snorri was killed by assassins in the pay of Gissur Þorvaldsson, a chieftain loyal to the Norwegian crown. He was approximately 62 years old.



Snorri Sturluson, a poet-chieftain from Iceland with friends in very high places, dedicated years to the creation of his masterwork, *Heimskringla*



Following his veneration as a saint, the people of Norway worshipped St Olaf and flocked to his place of death

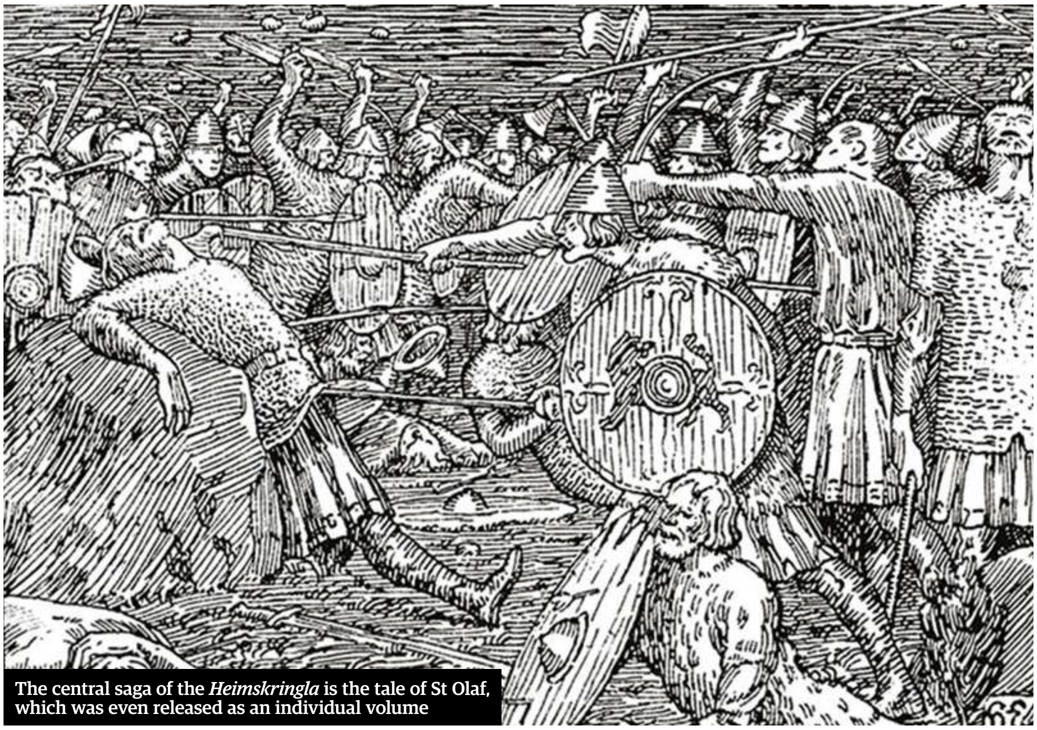
flagship, Olaf raised his shield high over his head and plunged into the waters, never to be seen again. *Heimskringla* leaves us with the tempting suggestion that Olaf didn't die at Svolder, but swam to safety. On this point, Snorri hedged his bets, warning readers that sightings of the king were far from reliable.

Christianisation complete

The seventh saga is that of Olaf II Haraldsson, better known to history as St Olaf. This was the first saga written by Snorri and it takes up approximately a third of the whole text. The tale of St Olaf is a remarkable one, following his journey from pillage to the throne and charting his efforts to bring Christianity to the Norse world. As the central pillar of *Heimskringla*, Olaf's story unites all those that have gone before and sets the stage for the remaining, far briefer, sagas. It's given particular emphasis because Olaf became a Christian saint. This was not just one more brave king, with myth and magic enhancing a story of conquest and politics, it was the moment at which the Norse and Christian worlds became inextricably interwoven.

Olaf II Haraldsson's saga takes place in the 11th century when, at the age of 12, he joined his first Viking expedition. Soon Olaf was in command of his own warship and he proved to be a born warrior. Olaf's reputation was sealed when, while still a teenager, his fleet sailed as far as London and there pulled down London Bridge during a battle. During his travels he spent time in Rouen, where he was baptised into the Christian faith, beginning the rocky road to sainthood.

As the great-great-great grandson of Harald Fairhair, Olaf's ambitions extended beyond territorial victories and wealth. Instead he wanted to unite the remaining scattered Norwegian kingdoms under the banner of a Christian king. He arrived in his ancestral land in 1015, at the age of 20, and there



The central saga of the *Heimskringla* is the tale of St Olaf, which was even released as an individual volume

declared himself rightful monarch with the backing of the five petty kings who ruled the Norwegian Uplands. One person who wasn't about to submit to Olaf's declaration was the Swede, Earl Sweyn, the de facto ruler of Norway. Yet for the Viking who had torn down London Bridge, a mere earl was no threat and Olaf's forces faced Sweyn's on the waters of the Langesundsfjorden inlet in 1016.

The battle of Nesjar was brutal, with the future of Norway itself on the line. The victory went to Olaf and Sweyn was forced back to Sweden, where he died. Olaf swiftly conquered any remaining naysayers and added their lands to the estate of the Norwegian crown. With a power base extending from Scandinavia to the Orkney Islands, he had become the most powerful king Norway had seen.

> "It was a land in which loyalty and honour always won the day"

Olaf proved himself to be a shrewd diplomat, too, consolidating his position not only through force but also through that time-honoured royal device, marriage. The long-standing feud between Norway and Sweden was ended when Olaf married the illegitimate daughter of King Olof Skötkonung of Sweden, which connected him to a brace of royal houses throughout Europe, including that of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, the ancestors of Britain's current royal family. During his reign, according to Snorri if not other sources, Olaf did all he could to encourage the growth of Christianity across his kingdom.

Olaf's flame burned bright but, as such flames often do, it didn't burn for long. In 1026, with the Danish King Cnut busy in England, Olaf saw his chance to make a play for Denmark. He enlisted his new Swedish allies to launch an attack on the Danish forces that were positioned in the Baltic Sea, bolstered by a number of English ships. A massive dam was built on the river Helge, directly in the path that the Anglo-Danish fleet would take. When they sailed into the estuary, Olaf ordered that the dam be released and, in the massive deluge that followed, the ambushed ships stood no chance. Unfortunately, Olaf had reckoned without the fact that there was still an enormous Danish fleet scattered throughout the area and as those ships began to gather, Olaf and the Swedish king, Anund Jacob, ordered their forces to retreat.

The defeat was to prove decisive and, when Cnut invaded Norway in retaliation, he found himself welcomed as Olaf was forced into exile in Kievan Rus. Though he had been driven from his kingdom, Olaf still had his faith and, during his exile in the Swedish province of Nerike, he continued to spread the gospel, baptising many Swedes there.

Olaf's ambition was to prove his undoing and in 1030 he attacked Cnut's forces again, hoping to win back his kingdom. Olaf made a perilous journey through Sweden to Stiklestad, a farm in the Veradalr valley. Here they met an army led by Kálfr Árnason, Hárekr ór Þjóttu and Thorir Hund, three of Olaf's former followers, and the two sides fell into a vicious battle. Thorir, who had strongly opposed Olaf's efforts to bring Christianity to Norway, carried a personal grudge against Olaf after his nephew had been killed by one of the king's advisors. At the battle of Stiklestad, Thorir wielded the spear that had claimed his beloved nephew's life. Snorri's description of the battle is epic and, at the end, Olaf was anything but unscathed. Wounded in the neck and knee, a spear to the abdomen struck the deathblow.

The saint of Scandinavia

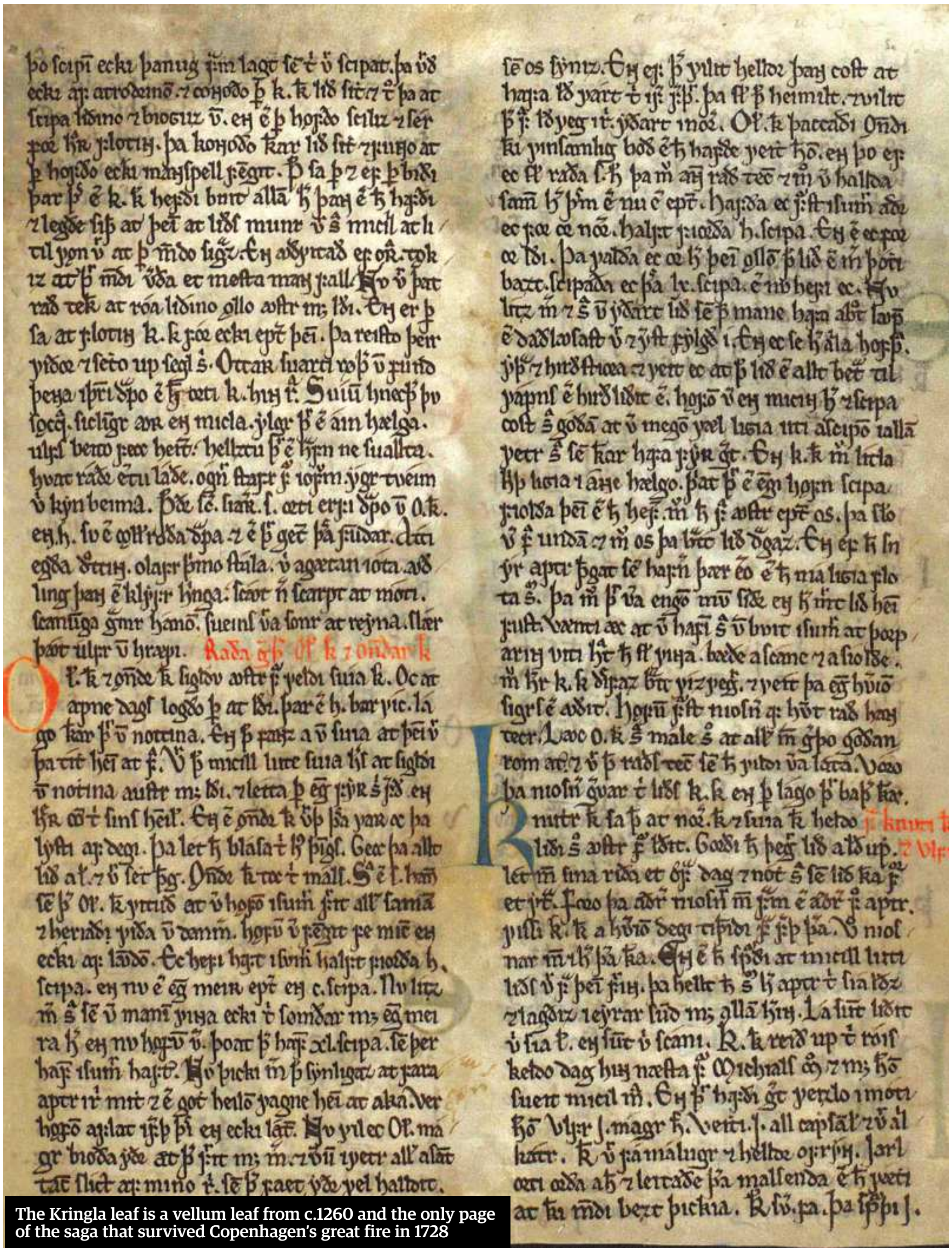
Olaf's body was secretly laid to rest on the banks of the Nidelva river, but his saga didn't end there. Within a year his coffin had risen to the top of the sand where it lay, apparently untouched by the elements. A decision was taken to rebury it at Clemenskirkja, with the blessing of Grimketel, an English bishop loyal to Olaf who did much to encourage the growth of Norwegian Christianity.

When the coffin was opened, the odour from within was sweet and fragrant and witnesses were stunned to see that Olaf had not decomposed at all. Instead, he looked as though he was sleeping, with a healthy blush to his cheeks, and his hair and nails showing signs of growth. To prove that this was a miracle rather than simple biology, Grimketel took clippings from the late king's hair and placed them in a fire. When they didn't burn, it was agreed that this was indeed a miracle. As Olaf was reinterred, a spring rose from the ground at his original burial place, which his followers believed had miraculous healing powers. His legend spread across the land. People spoke in wonder of the man who had ruled Norway for 15 years and fought in 20 battles before he died at the age of 35. Even more than that, they now celebrated the miracles that happened in St Olaf's name.

Olaf was a tough act to follow and, in *Heimskringla*, that falls to Magnús Olafsson, or Magnús Góði, the Good. As the illegitimate child of St Olaf, he was just 11 years old when he gathered an army and went into his late father's lands to reclaim them from the ailing Cnut. He became king upon Cnut's death, but faced bitter opposition from his Danish counterpart, Hǫrða-Knútr, Cnut's son.

Magnús's first priority, however, was to deal with some unfinished family business. He sought out the men who had fought against his late father at Stiklestad and fined them heavily for their treachery, earning the ire of some of the most powerful landowners in Norway. Magnús turned not to force, but to diplomacy, and held a council to decide on a set of laws that would be written down and obeyed by all, from the wealthy to the poor. This code, known as *Grágás*, reversed the ill-feeling that Magnús had faced and earned him the epithet 'the Good'.

Magnús and Hǫrða-Knútr decided not to fight over their lands. When Hǫrða-Knútr died, the 18-year-old Magnús became the first king of Denmark and Norway, and the people of both nations rejoiced. Magnús introduced sweeping reforms, reorganising the administration of the nation he had inherited, but one man didn't care for the new king at all. Sweyn Estridsen, Cnut's nephew and Hǫrða-Knútr's sometime regent, believed that he should be king. The embittered Sweyn led an invasion by the Wends but was comprehensively defeated by Magnús, who strode into battle wielding his late father's fearsome battle-axe, Hel. The victory sealed Magnús's reputation as a warrior king and when he granted Sweyn an earldom despite his betrayal, it sealed his reputation as a man of honour, too.



The Kringla leaf is a vellum leaf from c.1260 and the only page of the saga that survived Copenhagen's great fire in 1728

Magnús had one last ambition to fulfil. He wrote to Edward the Confessor, the English king, and told him to surrender the crown of England or it would be taken by force. Edward responded that he would do no such thing. Magnús once again chose peace over war and capitulated, allowing Edward to keep his kingdom. It is on that note of hope that the saga of Magnús ends, and that of Harald Sigurdsson (also known as Hardråde, or Hardruler) begins.

The hard ruler

Harald was the half-brother of St Olaf and a direct descendent of Harald Fairhair. As a military leader in the service of Yaroslav the Wise, his career took him from the Byzantine Empire to Sicily and Africa, with Harald conquering more than 80 cities and amassing immense wealth as he went. Eventually he arrived in Jerusalem where he surrendered much of his wealth, depositing it at the Holy Sepulchre as an offering to God. That done, he slaughtered bandits and robbers on the roads to the Holy Land as he departed, restoring safety to the pilgrim routes.

Harald's luck ran out when he was captured and imprisoned by the Greeks but, thanks to an intervention by the ghost of St Olaf, he made good his escape. When he learned that Magnús was now king of Norway and Denmark, Harald set out to oppose him, determined to win back what he believed was rightfully his. However, when the two men met in 1046, Magnús's diplomatic skills won the day once again. He offered his half-uncle a compromise, promising to make him co-ruler of Norway. Harald accepted, and in return he shared his fortune with Magnús, sealing the union.

The two men ruled together until Magnús's death, when Harald became king in Norway and Sweyn Estridsen king in Denmark. Harald was a wise and popular ruler, fair and just when he needed to be and quick to undertake charitable works, but he longed for the Danish crown. Despite fierce battles, it was an ambition he never realised, and when he and Sweyn agreed a truce, Harald turned his attention to England. He sailed for Jorvik, known today as York, and triumphed against Harold Godwinson's forces at the Battle of Fulford in 1066. It was his last victory. Days later, at the age of 51, Harald fell at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, killed by an arrow to the throat.

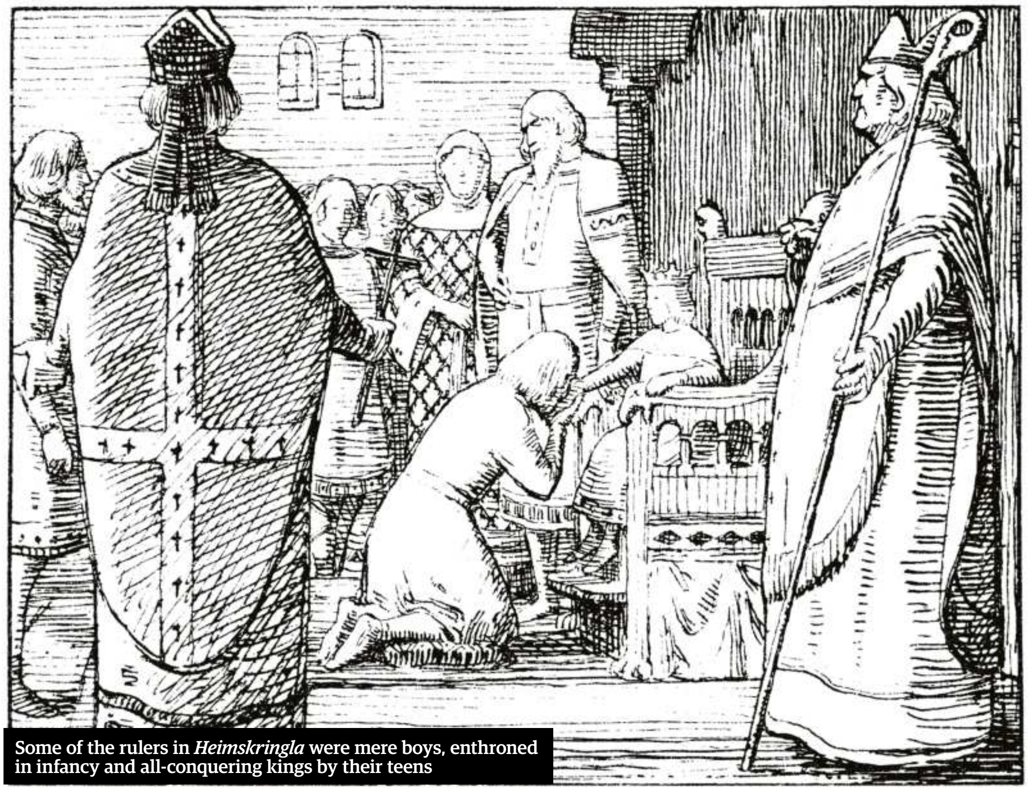
In the next saga, Harald Hardråde's son, Olaf Kyrre, devotes himself to building settlements and churches, including one on the site of St Olaf's original burial place. It is notable mainly for an incident in which a shrine of the late saint is carried through the streets, leaving miracles in its wake including healing the blind, curing the sick and even uncovering the murder of a child! The popular Olaf Kyrre was not a conqueror but a consolidator and, in his hands, Norway became an ever more stable realm. He died after 26 years of rule, leaving his people bereft.

Olaf Kyrre's only son, Magnus Barefoot, succeeded his father but he was a man of war, not peace, and took particular exception to the Swedes and Danes. He raided the coast and dealt out violent punishments to his enemies until his travels brought him to Scotland and Ireland, where he arranged for the marriage of his son to the daughter of the Irish king. Magnus gave no quarter during his raids, slaughtering those who stood against him and sacking their settlements as far as Anglesey.

It was here that Magnus engaged a Norman force and killed Hugh of Montgomery at the Battle of Anglesey Sound, but his growing power worried the English and earned him new enemies in Ireland. It was one of these enemies who eventually slew the 29-year-old Magnus in 1103, after he'd spent a decade on the Norwegian throne.

From raiding to crusading

In *Magnússona saga*, Snorri continues the story of Magnus Barefoot's son, Sigurd the Crusader. As one of three brothers who were expected to co-rule, the teenage Sigurd left his kingdom in his brothers' hands and became the first European monarch to embark on a Crusade. It took him across the continent and into the Holy Land at the head of thousands of soldiers, where he enjoyed immense success, allying with the Roman emperor as well as many of the monarchs he met on his travels. Sigurd surrendered much of the loot he had acquired to the Byzantine emperor in return for horses and supplies to see him safely home, keeping only a splinter of the cross on which Christ was crucified. He returned to find a country that had been ably cared for by his brother Eystein, who had been busy building monasteries and churches, as well as a breathtaking timber palace, the greatest such structure in the land. The early death of their younger brother, Olaf, left Eystein and Sigurd to rule together, and they enjoyed



Some of the rulers in *Heimskringla* were mere boys, enthroned in infancy and all-conquering kings by their teens

> "A spring rose from the ground at Olaf's burial place that had miraculous healing powers"

enormous popularity in Norway. Despite their joint rule, Sigurd and Eystein were still brothers at heart and Snorri includes a story in which the two enjoy a few beers and begin to sing their own praises in an effort to outdo one another. It's a curious glimpse of humanity that presents the monarchs not as lofty characters of myth, but as men and brothers.

Eystein died in 1123 and Sigurd became subject to fits of melancholy and doom-laden, prophetic dreams. He briefly returned to crusading, crushing a rebellion in Sweden where converts had reverted to their Old Norse religion, but preferred to safeguard his Norwegian kingdom, which prospered until his death in 1130.

Sigurd's son, Magnus the Blind, inherited the throne on his father's death, alongside his uncle, Haraldr Gilli. A drinker and a difficult man, Magnus could not have been more different to the affable Haraldr. With each man ruling 50 per cent of the kingdom, four years of uneasy peace exploded into war when Magnus overthrew Haraldr after the Battle of Färlev. Haraldr was forced to flee and regroup, returning to find Magnus settled in Bergen. He took his foe by surprise, blinding and castrating Magnus and severing one of his legs before throwing him in prison. This began a civil war that would rumble on for decades.

Haraldr met his match when a man named Sigurdr Slembi approached him, claiming to be his half-brother by Magnus Barefoot. When Haraldr refused to accept his claims, Sigurdr murdered him and freed Magnus the Blind. Haraldr was succeeded by his sons, Inge and Sigurd II Haraldsson.

Brother fighting brother

Sigurd II Haraldsson arrived in Norway to find the incapacitated Magnus attempting to seize power alongside Sigurdr Slembi, with the backing of a Danish military fleet. The unpopular pair had little hope of success and it evaporated completely when their union with Denmark collapsed, leading them into a final battle with Inge and Sigurd II Haraldsson in which Magnus was killed and Sigurdr captured. He faced a terrible punishment and was tortured and mutilated before his eventual execution.

Inge enjoyed great popularity with the chieftains of Norway, which his brother envied, and when a third brother, Eystein, joined them, their relationship grew even more strained. Sigurd was overbearing, Eystein greedy and Inge ambitious; it was a heady mix and when each man had a son of his own, power struggles erupted.

When Sigurd's followers tortured and killed one of Eystein's followers, the two kings argued, while Inge was convinced that his brothers were conspiring against him. More than 25 years of peaceful co-rule ended in civil war when Sigurd and Inge met to discuss their differences. A fight broke out between their followers and, when Eystein arrived to calm the dispute, he found Sigurd dead, having been killed by Gregorius Dagsson, a confidante of Inge. Gregorius fled for the court of Inge, with Eystein in pursuit.

Eystein and Inge negotiated an uneasy peace but it lasted just two years before war broke out again. Inge triumphed but, after Eystein's death, the latter's followers flocked to Håkon Herdebreid, the Broadshouldered, who was Sigurd II Haraldsson's son and the star of the penultimate saga.

Håkon was determined to avenge his father's death, but as quickly as he gained followers, Inge punished them with death or exile. Håkon and Inge did battle on the ice just outside Oslo and it was here that Inge fell, 25 years after he came to power. The final saga of *Heimskringla*, that of Magnus Erlingsson, begins just as Håkon consolidates his reign.

Magnus, the grandson of Sigurd the Crusader, was just five years old when Inge died. His father, Erlingr Skakki, had been one of Inge's most loyal followers and was a worthy foe, defeating and seizing Håkon's ships as he began to chip away at the king's power. Despite Magnus's youth, Erlingr always kept him close by as a potent reminder of what he was fighting for.

Erlingr and Håkon faced one another at the Battle of Sekken a year later, where Håkon was killed and Magnus was proclaimed King Magnus V of Norway. He inherited a wealthy kingdom and Erlingr ruled as his regent, successfully defeating the many pretenders to his little boy's throne, including Óláfr, the late Eystein's grandson. When Magnus came of age, his father continued to wield enormous power and even negotiated a truce with King Valdamar of Denmark, who had taken a rather pointed interest in Norway. His next foe, however, would be rather more troublesome.

A man named Eystein, who claimed to be the son of the late King Eystein, gathered an army and launched a coup against Magnus. By now a young man known for his love of fashion, partying and women, it was the king's first chance to prove his mettle and he did so admirably. He crushed Eystein's forces and sent the pretender into hiding, but Eystein concealed himself on a farm, where the loyal farmer killed him on sight. Magnus survived a serious axe wound during the battle and returned to his kingdom a hero. It is on this upbeat note that the monumental *Heimskringla* ends.

The vast scope of *Heimskringla* cannot be underestimated, even if its historical accuracy might be loose on occasions. From its roots in Norse legend and mythology, slowly historical fact begins to mingle with magic until, by the end of the book, Snorri's sagas are rooted in real history. Although its accuracy is debatable, *Heimskringla* captures perfectly the power of the Norse saga, from a land forged by ancient gods to the advent of Christianity. No matter what their faith, though, Snorri's kings are men to be reckoned with, whether warrior or diplomat. Though they lose the magical powers Odin wielded, they never lose sight of their responsibility to the country and, as the ancient Norsemen become the Vikings of history, Snorri shows us a land in which bravery is simply part of human nature and one in which loyalty and honour always win the day.

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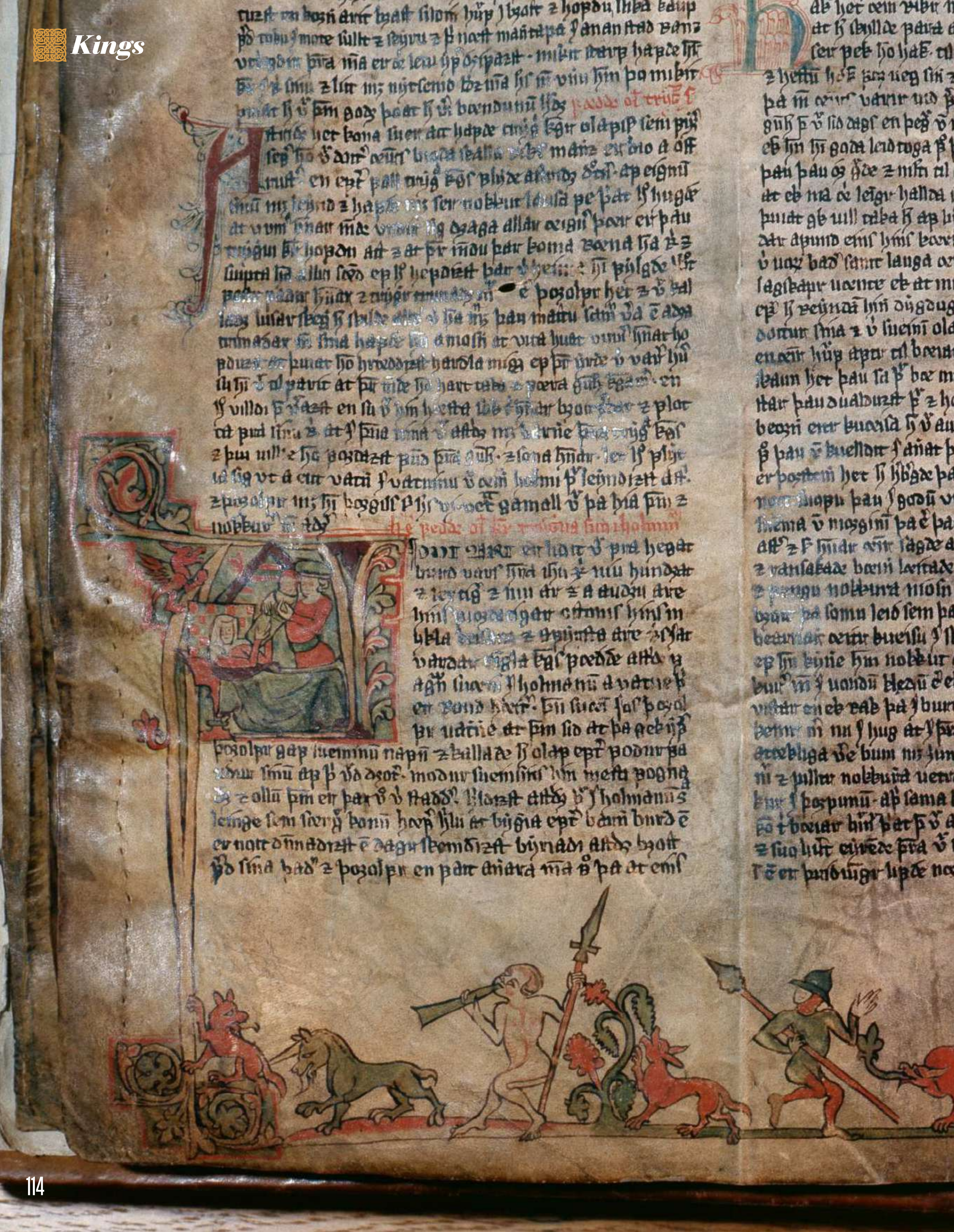
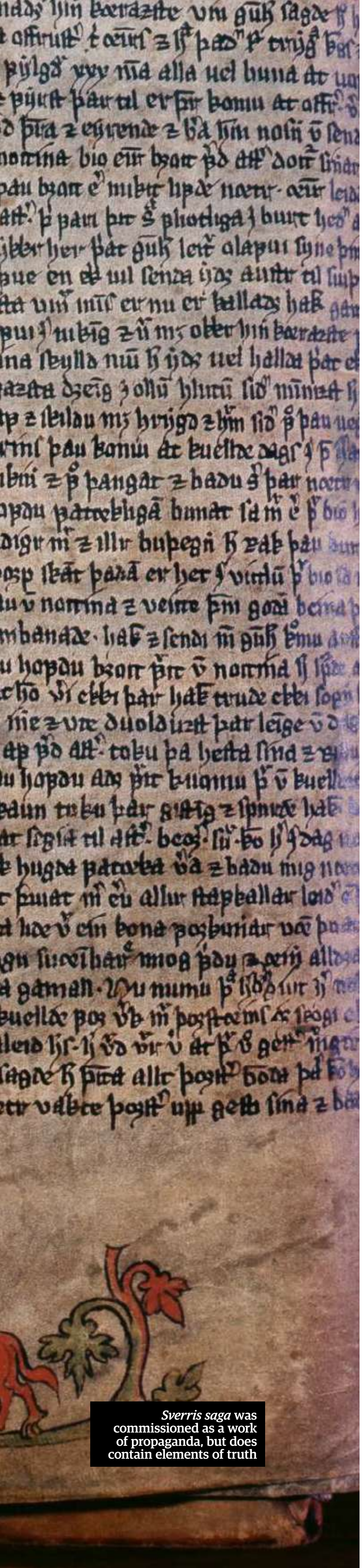




Sverris saga was commissioned as a work of propaganda, but does contain elements of truth

THE USURPER

The saga of Sverre is filled with a lust for power set against a backdrop of warring factions vying for a throne

Written by Joanna Elphick

There was once a man by the name of Sverre Sigurdsson, whose desire for power was unparalleled. Having been raised in the household of his Uncle Roe, who was Bishop of the Faroes, young Sverre was expected to join the priesthood. The boy studied hard and was eventually ordained but such a holy, quiet life did not suit the feisty Sverre. He quickly became restless, longing for adventure and having many dreams in which it became clear that he was destined for far greater things than the destiny of a local priest.

His lofty beliefs were reinforced by his beloved mother, Gunnhild, who revealed that Sverre was not her husband's child but was, in fact, the son of King Sigurd Munn. This, Sverre reasoned, was why the priesthood did not sit well with him. He was the offspring of a mighty king and was indeed destined for a far better lifestyle, and now he intended to claim a throne of his own.

Sverre's alleged father, King Sigurd II Munn of Norway, had been murdered by his brother and this had left the country in turmoil. Succession to the throne had not been clear and various parties stepped forward claiming their right to rule. Sverre listened to the tales of chaos with interest. Surely he, as illegitimate son, had just as much right to take the throne? However, he would have to fight to achieve his destiny; such power would not come easily.

Magnus Erlingsson had been crowned king, with his own father, Erlingr Skakki, acting as regent until he had come of age. The Church was in favour of this monarch and, with such a powerful ally, any uprisings were soon quashed.

Sverre, who had turned his back on the Church and had subsequently been defrocked, would not be popular but this did not deter him from travelling to Norway in search of a country to rule.

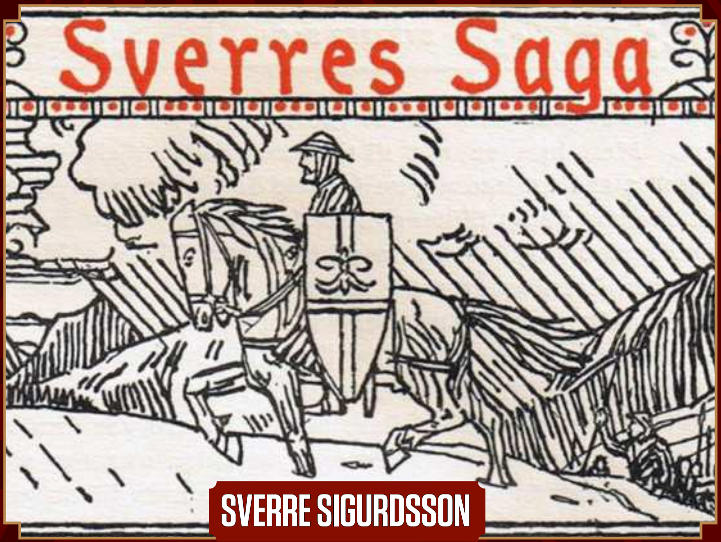
Sverre arrived in Norway, "young and alone and unknown to any". His assertion of royal descent was weak and unproven, and taking the throne by force seemed impossible since he commanded no armies or financial backing. However, luck was on his side, for the lonely usurper made contact with a local Swedish ruler by the name of Birger Brosa, who took the young man in. Brosa, who was married to Sigurd Munn's sister, supported a ragged group of men, known as the Birchlegs, who were fighting to put their leader, Oystein Moyla, on the throne. Sadly, Moyla had perished during the Battle of Re and the group were looking for a new leader.

The Birchlegs, so-called because of their penchant for binding their feet with birch bark if they could not afford shoes, were little more than 70 vagabonds with no fighting skills. This was not the vast army Sverre had imagined he would be leading into battle, but it was a start, and he proceeded to turn them into a force to be reckoned with.

During the summer of 1177, Sverre was proclaimed king at Oretinget. This was a great victory, but it was not enough for the power-hungry leader who still desired Norway for himself. Further minor skirmishes ensued but, although victorious, King Sverre was forced across Sognefjell where he and

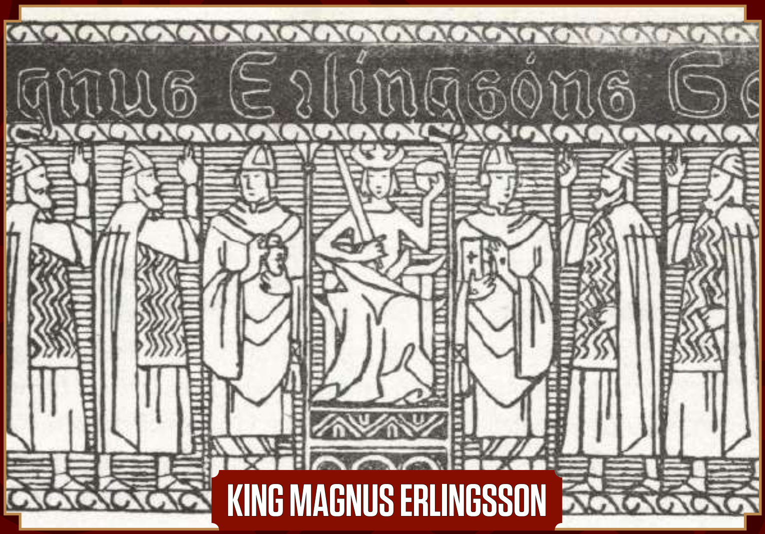
A CLASH OF KINGS

The warring factions of *Sverris saga*



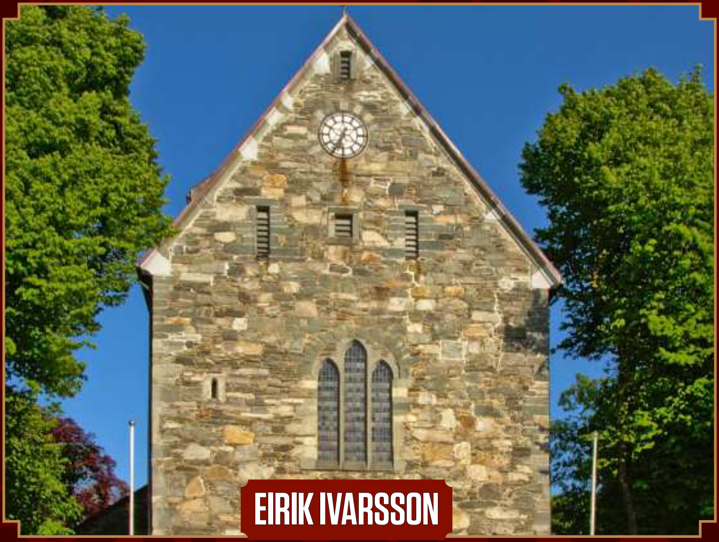
SVERRE SIGURDSSON

Sverre Sigurdsson was born in 1151, the son of a comb maker. A later claim that he was the illegitimate son of King Sigurd Munn was never proven, and citing *Sverris saga* is futile since at least part of the manuscript was written under his own sponsorship. Irrespective of his possible beginnings, he is considered to be one of the most important rulers of Norway's past. Unlike other Norse warriors of the day, the innovative fighter commanded his army on horseback, shouting orders from the back of the troops. This was certainly due to his short stature rather than cowardice.



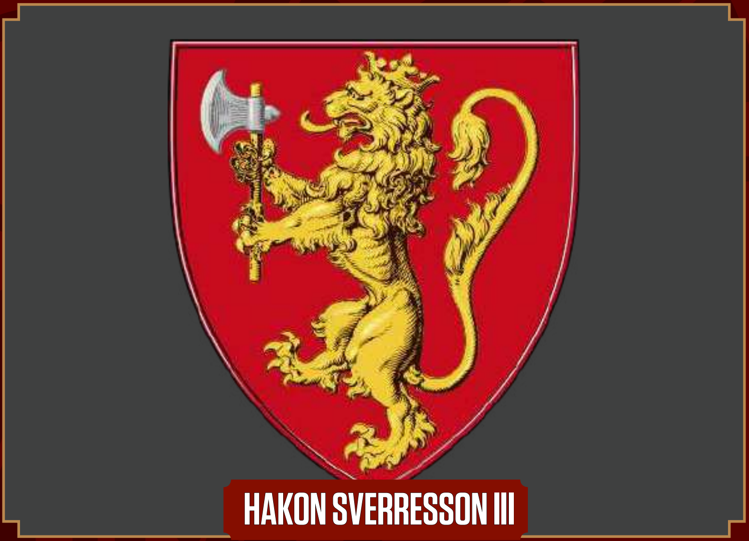
KING MAGNUS ERLINGSSON

Magnus Erlingsson was five years old when Hakon Herdebrei's men made him their figurehead ruler. In 1164, he was crowned King by Oystein Erlendsson, the Archbishop of Nidaros and the Church and aristocracy continued to support him through his reign. But it was his father, Erlingr Skakki, who wielded all the power. After his father's death, Magnus continued his alliance with the Church, changing his party's name to 'Heklung', old Norse for hood, in honour of their monk-like clothing. Despite fighting off several would-be usurpers, he was eventually deposed.



EIRIK IVARSSON

Eirik Ivarsson, the Bishop of Stavanger, was elected as successor to Oystein Erlendsson, the Archbishop of Nidaros on 26th January, 1188. He had been trained in Paris and left France with some harsh beliefs regarding the superiority of the Church. His views and European-Catholic outlook meant he was opposed to all of Sverre Sigurdsson's movements and actions, particularly his proposed legislation concerning the King's authority over ecumenical matters.



HAKON SVERRESSON III

King Hakon III was born the second illegitimate son of Sverre Sigurdsson and, most likely, Astrid Roesdatter, the daughter of Bishop Roe of the Faroe Islands. He supported his father, leading an army during the Balgler Wars in 1197, and was respected by the Birchlegs, who made him their chieftain on Sverre's death. Later that year, he was made King in Nidaros. Unlike his father before him, Hakon stayed on friendly terms with the common people.

“It soon became clear that he was destined for far greater things than the destiny of a local priest”

his men struggled against the bitterly cold winds and freezing snow. Spring brought renewed hope and the Birchlegs continued to fight their way across the land to Trondelag. Eventually, after much toing and froing, Sverre pushed King Magnus and his warring father, Erlingr Skakki, back far enough so that the Birchlegs could spend the winter in the relative safety and splendour of Nidaros.

Sverre and his men faced their first large-scale battle at Kalvskinnet, where they delivered a crushing blow against Magnus. Although the King escaped with his life, many of his men perished on the battlefield, including his own father, Earl Erlingr Skakki. Since he had been the real military genius, King Magnus was now vulnerable and Sverre was in a position to take full control. Ever the tactical dramatist, King Sverre decided to give the Earl's eulogy himself, turning the moment into a rallying propaganda speech, declaring the loss of a good soldier but, in its place, the rise of a great one. His words were crystal clear in both sound and meaning and the people were duly impressed. Gradually, his words altered, claiming that Erlingr in fact bore the helmet of terror and in doing so, a shadow was cast across the legitimacy of King Magnus' rule. The people took Sverre at his word and accepted him as king.

But Magnus's 'Heklungs' continued to fight both on land and at sea. His strong hold over western Norway meant that supplies failed to reach Sverre, causing him to trek overland to plunder for goods. While he was away, Magnus stormed Trondelag and burned the Birchlegs' fleet to the ground. This was a mighty blow indeed, but the unstoppable Sverre quickly built new ships and amassed a better, stronger fleet, including the magnificent Mariasuda, the largest ship afloat.

Magnus, too, built more ships and sailed towards Bergen, where he met Sverre at Fimreite, on the long, thin Sognefjord. Both kings had fine vessels but none so impressive as Mariasuda. Half the enemy fleet were held back, finding it impossible to pass her in the narrow fjord, while Sverre's men attacked the remaining outlying ships.

The battle was a fierce one, resulting in the deaths of many of Magnus' men, who had overcrowded their own ships and subsequently drowned. A rumour, which was soon verified, spread through the troops, claiming that King Magnus himself had been killed. Whilst the Heklung made their escape, Sverre told the Birchlegs to hunt for the body in the water. Eventually, he was discovered and, with much pomp and ceremony, King Sverre brought him back to Bergen. His arrival was a fantastic spectacle, showing him to be a powerful victor and, therefore, rightful ruler of all Norway. His eulogy referred to the defunct king as 'an honourable chief in many respects', and adorned by kingly descent', but the tone was obvious to all. Sverre was the true king now.

Sadly, the death of his arch enemy did not put an end to the warring. A year later, a band of dissidents named the Kuvlungs, began to gain control of eastern and western Norway. A number of irritating skirmishes took place until their leader, Jon Kuvlung, was eventually killed. This was followed by a further pretender to the throne in the shape of Sigurd, bastard son of Magnus Erlingsson. The leader of this new rebel group was Magnus' brother-in-law, Hallkjell Jonsson, who aligned himself to the Earl of Orkney. Calling themselves the Oyskjeggene, the group of men fought Sverre at the Battle of Flovag. Once again, the powerful King won but the never-ending wars were beginning to take their toll. Sverre longed to establish peace with the Church and hoped that this could be achieved with Eirik Ivarsson, Bishop of Stavanger. With hope in his heart, Sverre asked that Eirik might crown him, thereby offering proof of recognition. Alas, it was not to be, rather, the bishop openly denied Sverre as rightful ruler. Pope Celestine III was in agreement and plans were made to excommunicate the Norwegian king. When Celestine died, the new Pope continued the proposal and a new church-backed group emerged to take on Sverre and the Birchlegs.

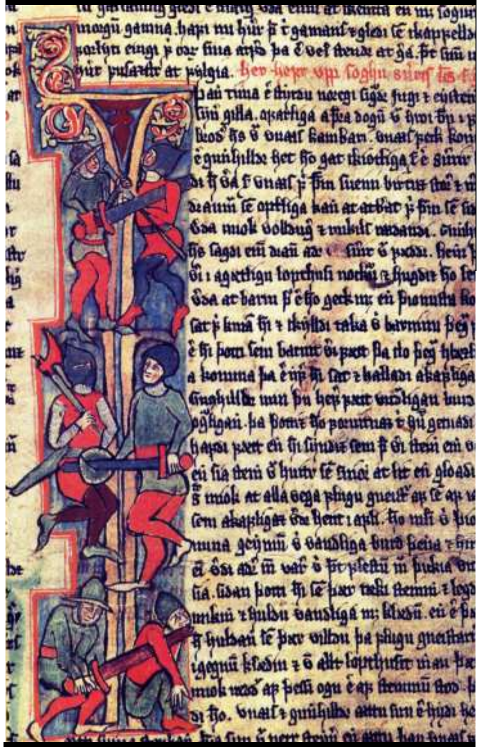
The Bagler party, who supported Inge, the son of King Magnus, gathered their forces and after a number of battles, burnt Bergen to the ground. Further battles followed and Sverre regained control but the victory proved to be a pyrrhic one. He was tired of the perpetual warring and, although he had longed for the right to rule, and had indeed achieved his dreams, the lack of peace had turned out to be a nightmare. A cold and tired Sverre fell sick whilst returning from yet another campaign. He wrote a letter to his son, Hakon, appointing him as his heir and successor, and advising him to seek reconciliation with the Church. He then quietly passed away. King Sverre, mighty ruler of Norway, had found peace at last.

The veracity of *Sverris saga* is highly questionable since it was mostly written during the king's own lifetime and was undoubtedly a work of propaganda. Its purpose was to legitimise Sverre's right to the throne and to make the journey to his kingship less bumpy. It could be argued that the manuscript failed, as his royal ascent consisted of little more than battles. However, the fact that many of the protagonists were most likely still living, suggests that there must have been at least some truth in the narration. People would have been able to read about themselves and, whilst they might have disagreed with the emphasis, the basic outcomes must have been recognisable as truth. Sverre wanted to be remembered as a man who was destined for greatness and who eventually realised his dreams. His speeches clearly depict a skilled orator and Sverre's Saga allowed him to be remembered exactly as he would have wished, an accomplished ruler, a fine strategist and an inspiring leader of men.

A vital record of history

The Book of Flatey, or *Flateyjarbók*, was created during the latter half of the 14th century and is considered to be one of the most important manuscripts to have come from Iceland. It was commissioned by a well-to-do Icelandic farmer by the name of Jon Hakonarson who heralded from Viodalstunga in the Northwest. He employed two priests, Magnus Þorhallsson and Jon Þoroarson, to scribe the sagas, and then called upon Magnus to illustrate the entire book. Thanks to a detailed introduction, the provenance and history of the manuscript is fully known, making the *Flateyjarbók* most unusual since many other Icelandic texts of the time were written and gathered in a piecemeal fashion and, unless they were particularly famous skalds, the writers have inevitably slipped into obscurity.

The original manuscript contained 202 pages. 23 further leaves were added in the 15th century and were finally bound in two large volumes during the 17th century, containing the trials and tribulations of the Norwegian kings. Although there are various suggestions as to where the manuscript was penned, the most likely is the scriptoria at Þingeyrar since one of the illustrations clearly depicts the Þingeyrar seal. Such magnificent illuminations are extremely unusual in Icelandic manuscripts and this suggests that the work was intended as a very special gift. Some historians have claimed that it was most likely created for King Olaf IV when he was a boy with the notion that it would inform the young king of the deeds and practices of those rulers who had gone before.



One of the huge A3 sized leaves from the beautifully illustrated *Flateyjarbók*, the finest manuscript that Viking Age Iceland ever produced

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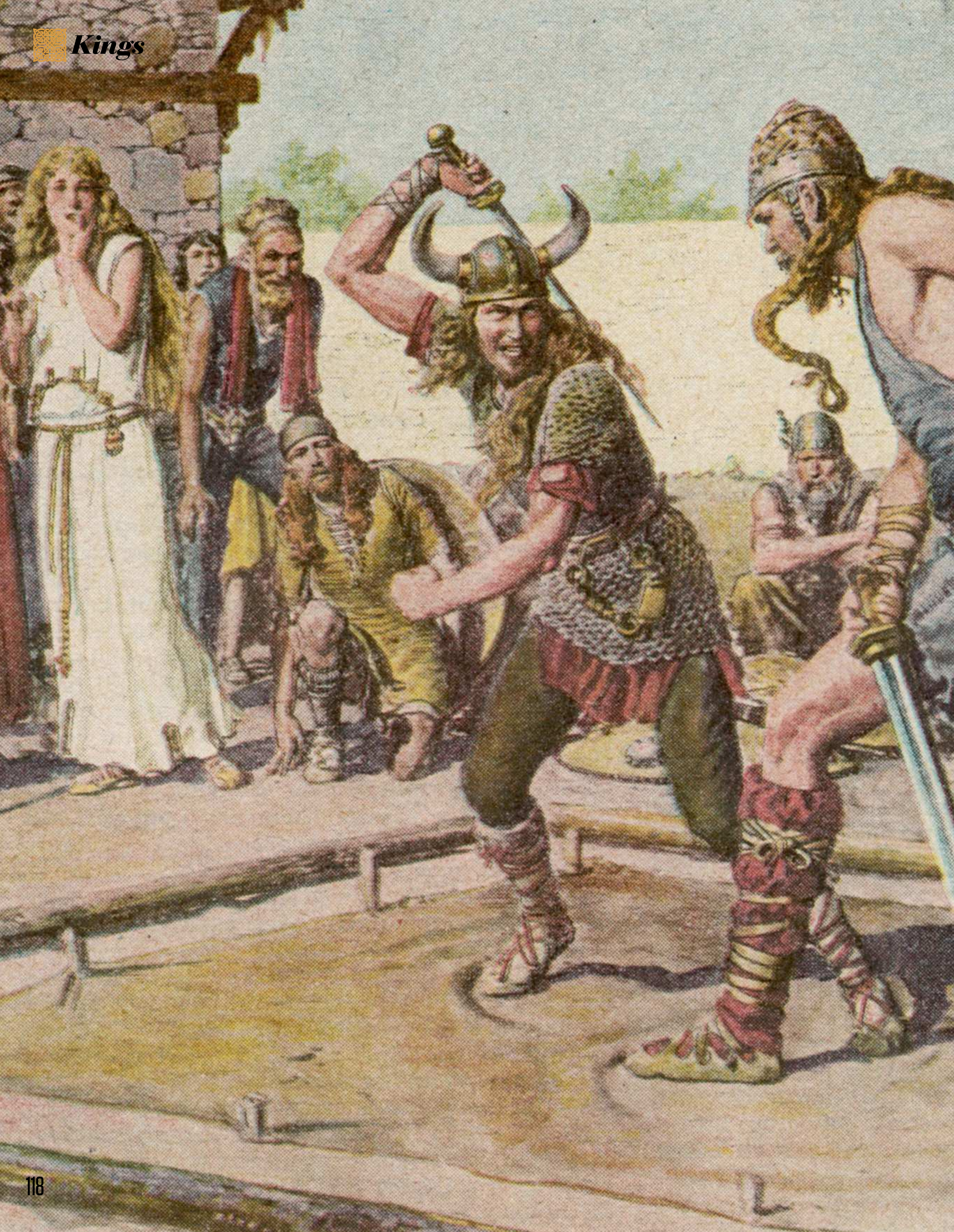
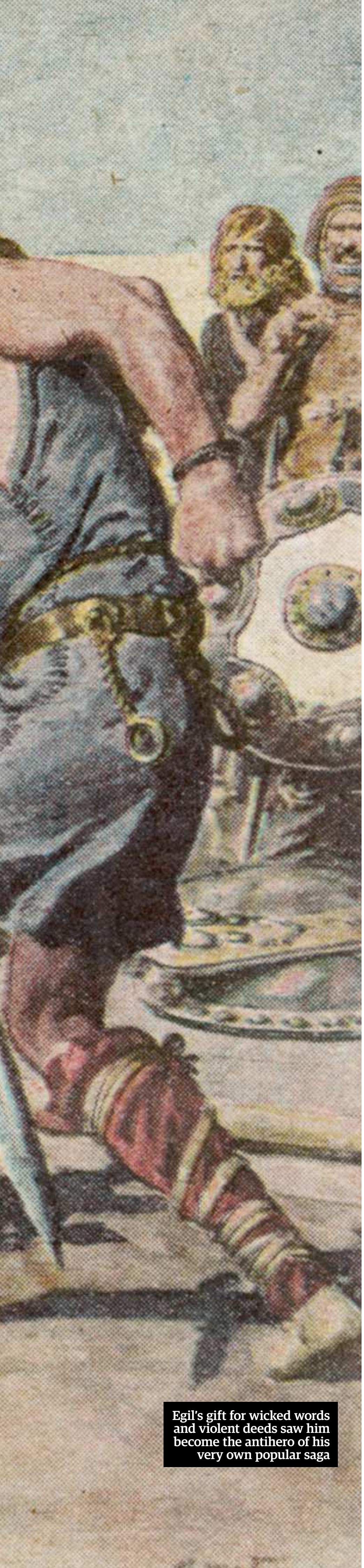




Egil's gift for wicked words and violent deeds saw him become the antihero of his very own popular saga

THE BRUTAL POET

Violent murders, royal feuds, curses and vengeance – who was Egil Skallagrímsson and what makes his story one of the most famed Icelandic sagas?

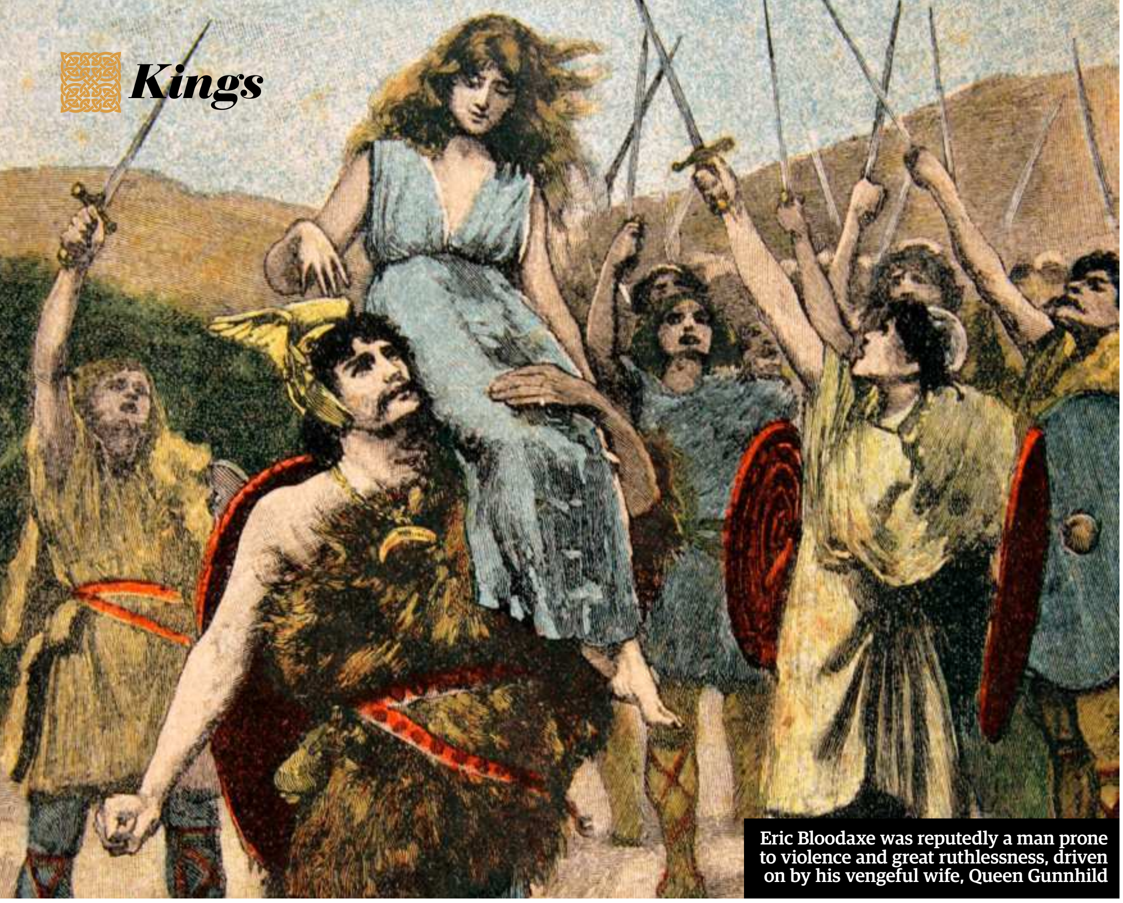
Written by Willow Winsham

The tantalising tale begins in Norway around the year 850, detailing the life and times of Ulf, the titular Egil's grandfather. Ulf, nicknamed Kveldulf or Evening Wolf, was well known for his 'berserker' temperament, and could, it was said, shapeshift come nightfall, imbuing the family with an air of violence from the start. When Kveldulf angered the king, Harald Fairhair, by not taking his side in the fight to unite Norway, he was given the option to go serve the king or send his son, Thorolf, in his stead. Thorolf duly became Harald's liegeman and initially earned great honour with the king: Harald made Thorolf a baron, and he inherited great wealth. The victim of deadly gossip and his own success, however, Thorolf fell from favour, and was killed by the king himself. While attempting to obtain redress for his brother's death, Kveldulf's other son, Grim – later known as Skallagrim due to his baldness – offended the king further by refusing to take Thorolf's place, and both Kveldulf and Skallagrim fled the country. Before they did so, however, they had their revenge: they recaptured a ship that had been Thorolf's and killed everyone on board, with Kveldulf unleashing his infamous maddened frenzy. This vengeance came at a price, though: Kveldulf died during the voyage, leaving Skallagrim to settle in Iceland alone.

Skallagrim had two sons, Thorolf (named after his uncle) and Egil. The focus of the saga then shifts to Egil, following the twists and turns of his life and that of his brother. Dark, tall and brooding, Egil was the opposite of his fair, handsome, people-pleasing brother. Contradictory, often morally ambiguous, from the start of his life Egil displayed great physical prowess. A violent temper was also evident from his early years: when an older boy humiliated him during a ball game, Egil attacked the offender with an axe, cleaving down to the brain. His physical strength, however, led to tragedy: when Egil was 12 years old, he and a friend dared challenge Egil's father, Skallagrim, only for the chief to smack Egil's friend into the ground, killing him. Skallagrim went further still and murdered Egil's old nurse. Enraged in his grief, Egil killed one of his father's men, further souring the relationship between father and son.

The rift between Skallagrim and Egil was so great, that when his brother, Thorolf, returned to Iceland from Norway (where he had been visiting his father's friend and was on friendly terms with the newly crowned Eric Bloodaxe), Egil announced that when his sibling went back to Norway, he would be going with him. Thorolf reluctantly agreed. It was a momentous journey, for Thorolf had another companion: Asgerdr, who he was returning to her family and also asking of them permission to marry.

The match was agreed to, and a wedding date set. Egil did not attend, however – illness was the pretext, but the more likely cause was that he could not bear to see Asgerdr wed to another, even one so close as his brother. To take his mind off matters, Egil travelled with Asgerdr's uncle, Thorir, becoming good friends with his son, Arinbjorn, who would become a lifelong friend and counsellor. Egil's ire was raised when Bard, the king's steward, declared there was no



Eric Bloodaxe was reputedly a man prone to violence and great ruthlessness, driven on by his vengeful wife, Queen Gunnhild

ale available for them after their journey. When the royal party arrived later, however, there was drink in abundance, a fact that did not escape the wily Egil's notice. Egil proceeded to retaliate with relentless teasing, goading Bard with pointed poetry, calling him out on his stinginess. Bard told Queen Gunnhild - to whom he was related - that Egil had insulted the king and queen themselves, declaring poetically that their ale was not good enough to quench his thirst. The pair hatched a deadly plan, and Bard, backed by Queen Gunnhild - a woman known for a scheming and ruthless nature - tried to do away with Egil through a poisoned drink. Wise to their plan, Egil revealed their duplicity, carving runes into the drinking horn and smearing the vessel with his own blood. The horn smashed, and Egil stabbed Bard to death before fleeing. The ensuing manhunt at King Eric's behest proved fruitless, and Egil killed the Queen's two brothers who'd been sent after him, further cementing her hatred of him.

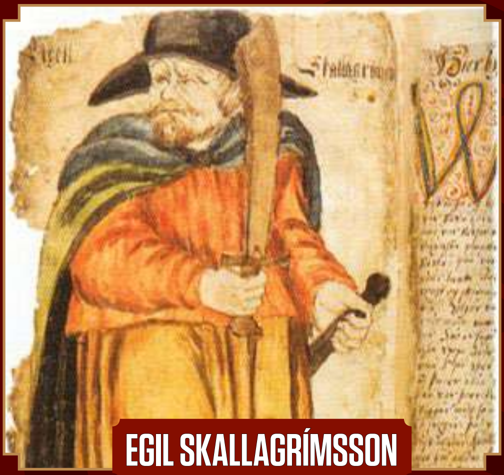
After such events, Egil and Thorolf left Norway, pillaging and plundering their way across Scandinavia. When they heard that King Athelstan of England was in need of men they joined his forces, and Egil - skilled also as a poet - earned rewards in return for the complimentary words he composed about King Athelstan. Both Egil and Thorolf were with Athelstan's forces when he took on Olaf the Red, king of Scotland. Death was to touch close to Egil once more now, as Thorolf was killed in battle. For his loss, the king paid Egil compensation to the tune of two chests brimming with silver, along with two gold rings and a cloak he had worn himself.

In the wake of Thorolf's death, Egil found himself with a bittersweet reward: he married Asgerdr, Thorolf's widow. When his new father-in-law died, however, fresh conflict was brewing. Asgerdr's half-sister claimed the whole inheritance on the pretext that Asgerdr herself was not entitled to claim due to the fact her parents had married without consent. When the matter was debated at the Gulaþing Assembly, Queen Gunnhild again intervened in Egil's affairs, sending one of her men to throw the gathering into disarray. Egil countered by cursing any who might try to use the land being disputed before fleeing by ship, foiling Gunnhild and Eric once more.

When Harald Fairhair died, Eric, now sole king and firmly Egil's enemy, declared the warrior-poet

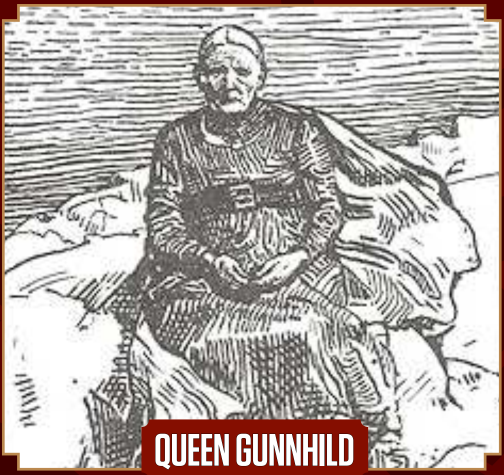
FRIENDS & ENEMIES

Egil constantly divided opinions



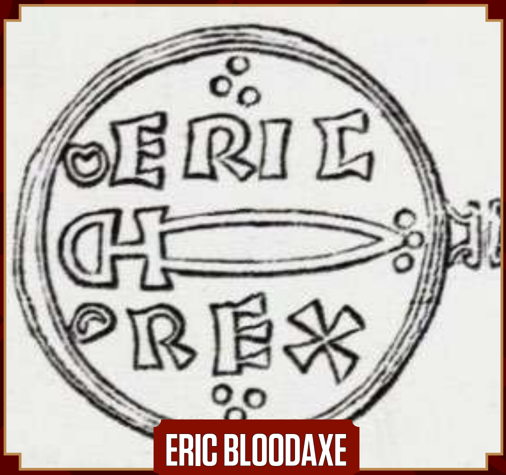
EGIL SKALLAGRÍMSSON

Hero or otherwise, Egil is the star of the saga that bears his name. The personality of the warrior-poet is a wealth of contradictions: quick to anger and violent he might be, but none can dispute his sense of loyalty, justice and honour. Capable of creating great beauty with his words, it is also hinted that Egil has magical abilities, the power to work rune magic. The sagas are the only source of information for the life of the elusive Egil.



QUEEN GUNNHILD

Vengeful, rumoured to be a sorceress, 'Mother of Kings' Gunnhild was a force to be reckoned with, a foe worthy of the wily Egil. Although her very historicity is debated, it's generally accepted that her father was the Danish King Gorm the Old, and that she and Eric met at a feast. Gunnhild was blamed for many of the excesses of her husband's rule, and, having outlived her spouse, was drowned in a bog on the orders of King Harald Bluetooth.



ERIC BLOODAXE

Eric Haraldsson reigned as King of Norway circa 930-935, his rule brief yet tumultuous if the information in the sagas is to be believed - although their veracity is questioned, the picture presented is of a man both bloody and brutal. His probably posthumous nickname hints at the murder of his own half-brothers to secure his throne, and his great fierceness. Eric is also believed to have also ruled as King of Northumbria on two occasions.

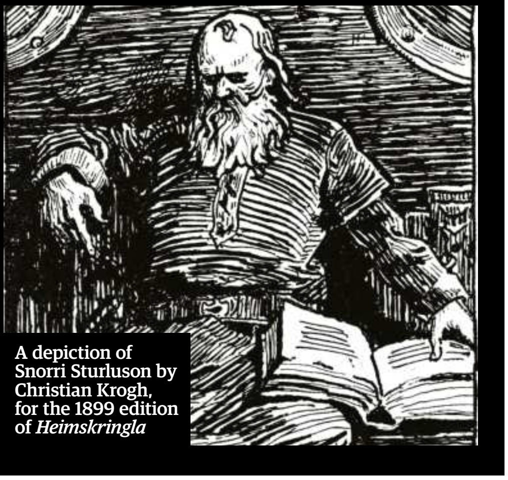
Snorri Sturluson, the presumed author of *Egils saga*, influential poet, historian and lawyer, is commemorated in this statue in Bergen, Norway

An elusive skald

It is not known for certain who lay behind the skilfully crafted words of *Egils saga*, and a positive identification of the author remains elusive. There are some clues to their identity however, and many have used the similarities in style between *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* to suggest the Icelandic author Snorri Sturluson was the creator of both works.

A prominent poet and historian with significant political influence, Snorri was the most powerful Icelandic chieftain between 1224-1230. Well placed to record, both in verse and prose, details of the events and society of his time, his privileged upbringing and extensive education ensured his abilities matched his ambitions. Without his works, much of what is known today of 12th and 13th century Norse history and mythology would have been lost to time.

Snorri became Law Speaker of the Alþingi – the Icelandic parliament – in 1215, a role that effectively made him spokesman for the king. Courted by the Norwegian king, Snorri initially promoted a union with Norway, angering fellow chiefs and sparking a period of feuding within Iceland that resulted in Snorri's defeat and switching allegiance to that of the Icelandic king once more. This pragmatic change of heart would be his downfall: Snorri Sturluson was assassinated in 1241 at the age of 62 in the cellar of his home in Reykholt.



A depiction of Snorri Sturluson by Christian Krogh, for the 1899 edition of *Heimskringla*

> "Poets were deeply valuable. A man with Egil's verbal prowess could make or break a ruler with their ability to sway popular opinion with their words"

an outlaw, to be killed on sight. Not one to take such matters lightly, Egil vowed vengeance against the royal family, his deepest ire reserved for Queen Gunnhild. He was true to his word: when winds fortuitously sent Egil to shore near the king's farm at Aarstad, Egil massacred those he found there. Eric's 10-year-old son was among those slain. Victorious, Egil hammered the point home and cursed the king and queen, setting a horse head mounted atop a hazel pole and calling for the nature spirits to send the royal couple out of Norway. This indeed came to pass, and Egil managed to cement Queen Gunnhild's hatred further still. When a twist of fate threw Egil into the royal couple's hands once more, he narrowly escaped with his life thanks to his poetical prowess, and the promise that he would never offend Eric again with his presence.

Egil lived out his days in Iceland, and, unlike many in the saga, he reached old age. Blind, and increasingly weak in body now, before his death he gave rise to an enduring legend. Unable to make the journey to scatter his silver at the Alþingi as he had wished, Egil hid his hoard. Egil's silver passed into legend along with the complex man himself.

Poets were deeply valuable within Viking society, and a man with Egil's verbal prowess could make or break a ruler with their ability to sway popular opinion with their words. The saga and the setting of Egil's family history reflects the period of migration that was taking place across Scandinavia during the preceding centuries, the harshness of that life and the long, inclement winters. The saga reflects all of this, Egil becoming the personification of the times in which the saga is set and the values and personalities of Viking society itself. There are no other historical sources to verify or otherwise the saga's version of events when it comes to Egil's life, and without it, he would be lost to history. This does not make his impact any less enduring, though, and there are many who claim to be descended from his line today.

KING ATHELSTAN

Considered the first King of England and one of the greatest Anglo-Saxon kings, Athelstan shows favour to Egil and his brother in the saga, and they join him in battle. The king's forces were victorious at the Battle of Brunanburh, and it may have been in this battle that Egil and his brother fought, and in which Thorolf lost his life. Athelstan died unmarried and childless, and rule passed to his half-brother, Edmund.

ARINBJORN

Son of Thorir, Arinbjorn became firm friends with Egil, and his presence at his side is a constant throughout the saga. He's the voice of reason, a counter to the impulsive Egil. He gave his friend counsel on how to win the wary Asgerdr, and attempted to reconcile Egil to Eric, saving his life when Gunnhild wanted his head. Arinbjorn was gifted with great insight, and his ability to read a situation frequently saved the day for Egil.

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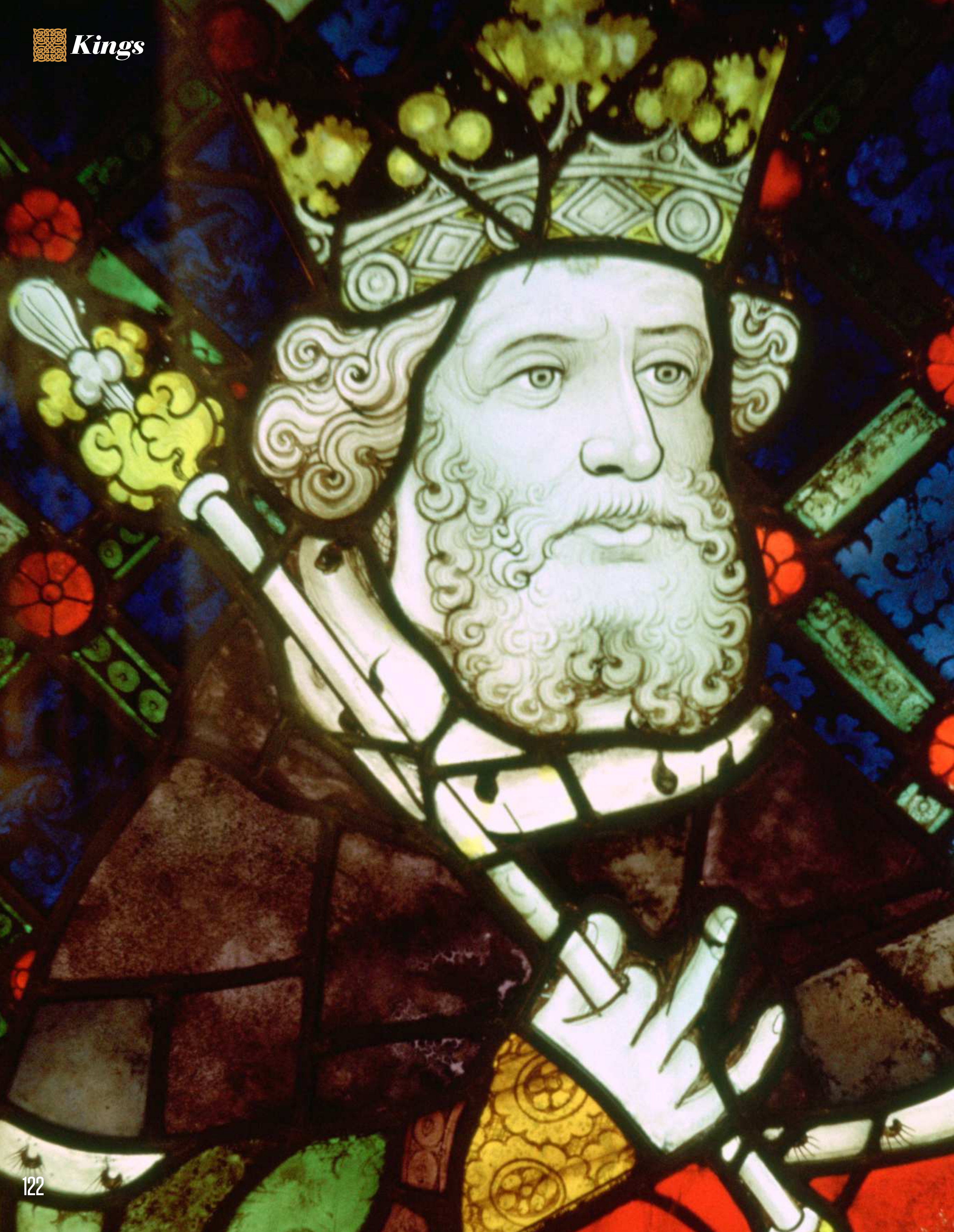


A 13th century stained glass window of King Cnut the Great of Denmark, England and Norway, from Canterbury Cathedral

CNUT'S DYNASTY

The *Knytlinga saga* details the lives, reigns and military campaigns of Danish monarchs spanning 200 years

Written by Michael Haskew

The *Knytlinga saga* tells the stories of the kings of Denmark from the early 10th century through to the end of the 12th century and is often mentioned in the company of other such manuscripts that are collectively known as the Kings' sagas.

Eighteen Danish monarchs are chronicled in the *Knytlinga saga*, and the stories include military campaigns, the rise to power, court intrigue and the introduction of the Christian church to Denmark and the territories of Norway and England, sometimes referred to as the North Sea Empire. The attributes of a good king, such as seeking to achieve and maintain peace and upholding the tenets of the church, are overarching themes.

The saga is believed to have been written by the skald Óláfr Þórðarson, a poet and reciter of heroic deeds, who probably lived from around 1210 to 1259. However, some dispute as to the identity of the author remains. The saga is patterned after the *Heimskringla*, an earlier saga about the Norwegian kings, and was probably written while the author was in Iceland. The expansion of the Danish Empire into England and Wendland, or eastern Germany, is recounted, and, while some of the skaldic poetry is reproduced from other sources, a full 50 of the 59 lines in the *Knytlinga saga* are written for the first time. No other documentation of these lines is known to exist, making the *Knytlinga saga* a prominent text in the history of Old Norse poetry. One factor that assists in dating the saga is the relatively soft treatment of the relationship between Denmark and neighbouring Norway, which had signed a treaty of peace sometime prior to 1257 after decades of rivalry.

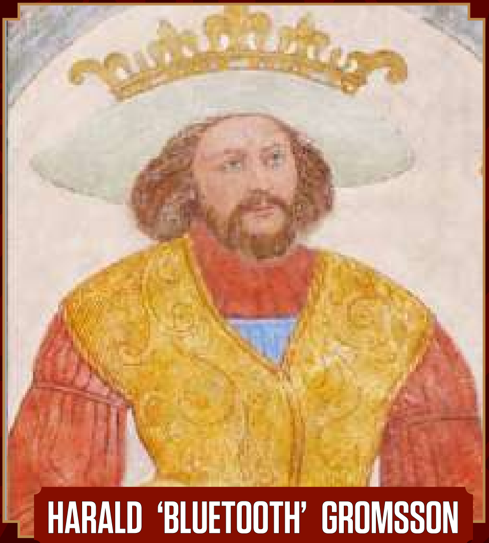
The saga begins with the rise to the Danish throne of Harald 'Bluetooth' Gormsson, who ruled from 958 to 986. His nickname is thought to have originated in the fact that he had a prominent tooth that was either blackened or 'blued' due to deterioration. Another story relates that he was called Blue Thane or Dark Thane ('Thane' meaning chief) while in England and that this was corrupted from the Anglo-Saxon "thegn" to the word "tan" when repeated in the Old Norse language. Stories of the Norwegian kings Magnús 'the Good' Olafsson and Harald Sigurdsson (or Harald Hardråde, the stern or hard ruler) are also included.

While the saga recounts the conquest of England by King Cnut the Great, it also engages the reader with the tales of King Cnut IV, who ruled Denmark from 1080 to 1086 and was a staunch supporter of the Roman Catholic Church. Cnut IV aspired to rule England as well but was murdered and later canonised. Eric the Good, king of Denmark from 1095 to 1103, a supporter of the Crusades and pilgrim to the Holy Land, is also a prominent figure.

Harald Bluetooth was the son of King Gorm the Old, the first king of Denmark and original patriarch of the Jelling dynasty. Harald is known for his construction projects and the restoration of many public structures and spaces in his kingdom. During his reign the domestic front was relatively quiet, which allowed him to look outward and exert influence as far to the south as Normandy

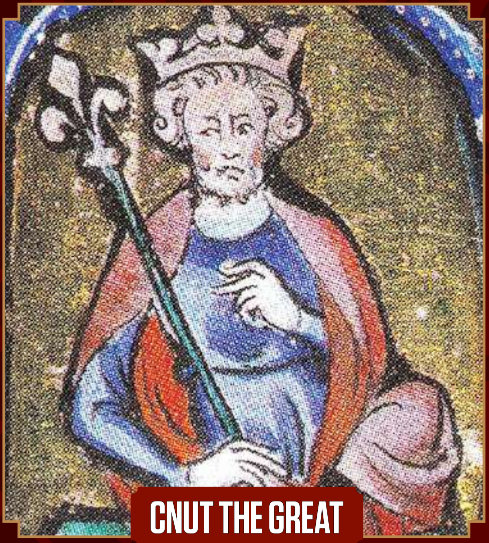
FAMILY VALUES

They could have ruled a North Sea Empire



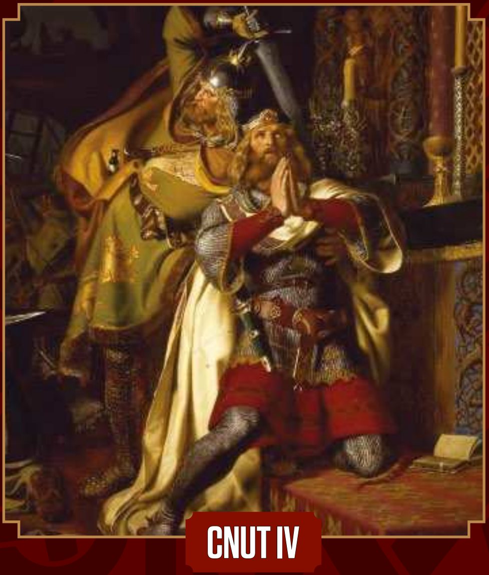
HARALD 'BLUETOOTH' GROMSSON

One of the best-known figures of Danish history, Harald Bluetooth is remembered for bringing Christianity to Denmark and Norway, although conversion from the pagan gods was slow in coming. Some historians believe his significant public works projects were intended to unite the territory under his rule while allowing the king to exert economic and military control over a wider expanse of territory.



CNUT THE GREAT

Cnut conquered England while still a prince of Denmark. On the death of his brother, Harald II, in 1018 AD, he assumed the Danish throne. A decade later he gained the throne of Norway and later occupied territory in Sweden. This gave Cnut mastery of the northern trade routes, strengthening the economy of the dominion. He's now viewed as one of the most capable rulers in the history of Europe.



CNUT IV

King Cnut IV is the patron saint of Denmark, canonised in 1101 CE after his assassination in 1086. His sainthood brought a sense of divine validity to the later monarchy, even though he was a strict ruler whose imposition of government regulation estranged him from his people and led directly to the peasant uprising that cost him his life.

ERIC THE GOOD

Also known as King Eric I, Eric the Good reigned as king of Denmark from 1095 to 1103 CE. He travelled to Rome and persuaded the Pope to canonise his brother, the late Cnut IV, supported the Crusades and died on the island of Cyprus during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Eric was loved by the Danish people and received the epithet 'the Good'.

while conquering territory in Samland to the east. Following the assassination of King Harald Greycloak of Norway, he ruled that country for a time.

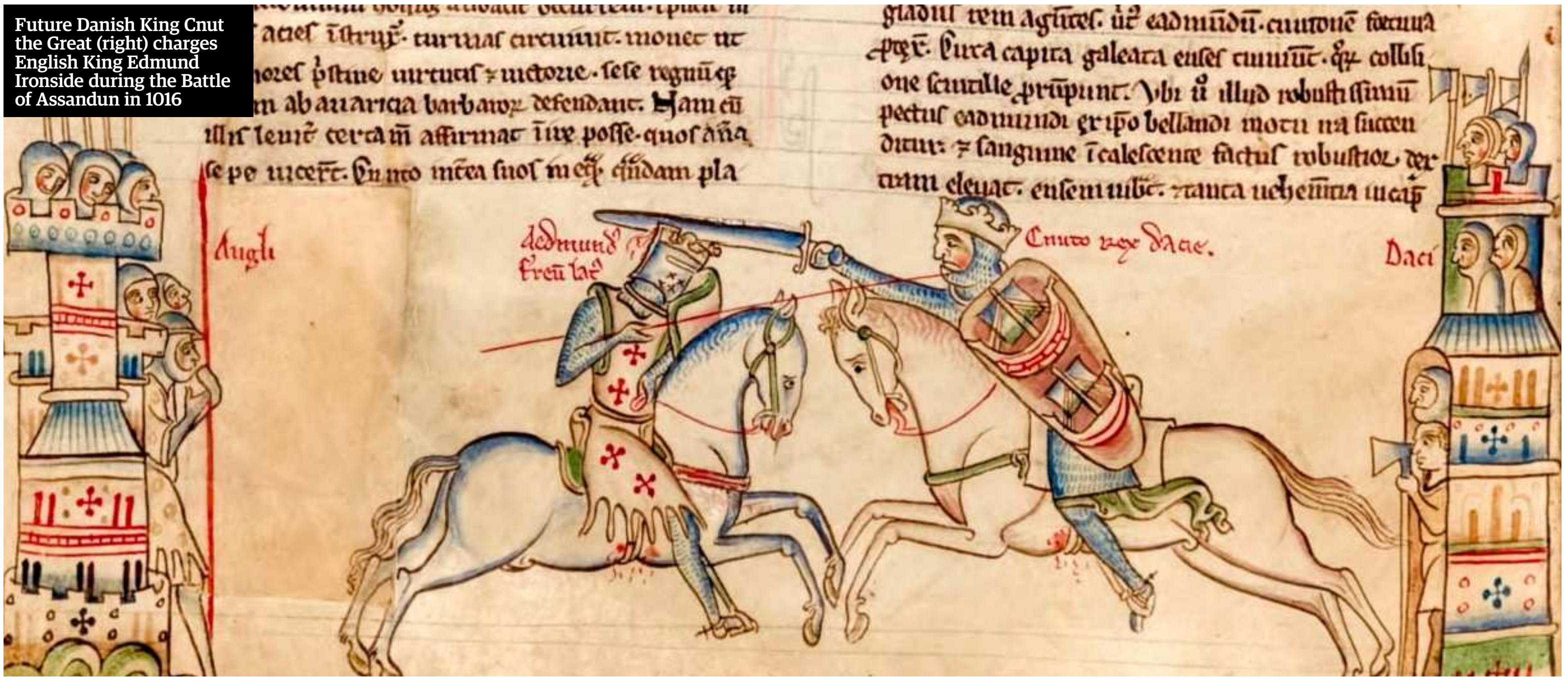
Bluetooth encountered opposition from the Swedish Prince Styrbjörn the Strong, who compelled him twice to seek peace on unfavourable terms. He also experienced military reversals at the hands of Germanic peoples and lost control of Norway around 974. He battled his own son, Sweyn Forkbeard, who led an uprising against the throne. Bluetooth was killed in the fighting, and some historians have concluded that Sweyn actually succeeded in forcing him from the throne prior to his death.

Bluetooth is credited with bringing Christianity to Denmark and is considered the kingdom's first monarch to be buried in soil consecrated by the church. His conversion is shrouded in conjecture, and conflicting stories exist. While *Knytlinga saga* opens with a rather abrupt announcement of Bluetooth's ascent to the throne, it rapidly progresses to the broader reach of his successors in their adventures. Although Bluetooth is remembered with a somewhat adverse perspective in terms of military success, his contribution to the spread of Christianity, although it was slow to take hold in Denmark and Norway, is considered by many to be his most significant accomplishment.

The controversial Sweyn Forkbeard led raids against England in reprisal for the St Brice's Day Massacre in 1002, when King Æthelred the Unready ordered the killing of Danes who were living in England at the time. After campaigning in Wessex and East Anglia in 1003-1004, the inability to feed his army amid a growing famine forced Sweyn to return to Denmark. Further raids emboldened Sweyn to attempt another invasion in 1013. Against stiff resistance, he marched on London, bypassed the city temporarily, and ventured westward to Bath, where he brought the local population to heel. Turning again towards London, he captured the city at the end of the year, and Æthelred fled into exile.

Accounts of Sweyn's rule after his great victory in England vary. Some assert that he died within weeks of his triumphant entry into London. The *Knytlinga saga*, however, tells a different story: "King Æthelred, Edgar's son, ruled there at the time, and in the many battles he and King Sweyn fought, victory fell now to one, now to the other, but King Sweyn conquered the larger part of England. Afterwards he spent many years there, looting and burning all over the country, and gained the reputation of England's arch enemy."

Either sooner or later, Sweyn's body was returned to Denmark for burial. His oldest son, Harald II, became king of Denmark around 1014, but the loyalty of the Danish forces in England was to Sweyn's younger son, Cnut. Amid this dissension, Æthelred returned from exile on the Isle of Wight and forced Cnut out of the country. Harald had served as regent in Denmark while Sweyn was fighting in England and ruled as the Danish king until his death in 1018. In the meantime, the stage was set for Cnut to gain lasting fame, renewing the bid for Danish domination of England with his own invasion in 1015 and



Future Danish King Cnut the Great (right) charges English King Edmund Ironside during the Battle of Assandun in 1016

succeeding his brother as king of Denmark.

The *Knytlinga saga* describes Cnut as being "...exceptionally tall and strong, and the handsomest of men, all except for his nose, that was thin, high-set, and rather hooked. He had a fair complexion nonetheless and a fine, thick head of hair. His eyes were better than those of other men, both the handsomer and the keener of their sight."

Cnut made landfall at Humber in northern England and marched towards the interior of the country, looting and pillaging as he went. He fought the English at Lindsey, took the hamlet of Hemmingborough and defeated his enemy at the River Tees in Northumberland. Meanwhile, Æthelred died and Cnut took his wife, Queen Emma, for his own. Cnut fought Æthelred's sons, principally Edmund Ironside, and, after striking a bargain with Cnut to divide the country, Edmund died in suspicious circumstances. Some scholars believe Cnut had him murdered. Upon Edmund's death, Cnut claimed all of England. Along with his sons, Harold Harefoot and Hǫrða-Knútr (or Harthacnut), Cnut the Great reigned in England and Denmark for nearly 20 years, and in Norway for seven.

A cornerstone of the *Knytlinga saga* is the story of another Cnut, Cnut IV, who was king of Denmark from 1080 to 1086. Cnut IV was a strong ruler who sought to broaden the influence of the monarchy and aspired to take the English throne once again. Cnut IV was a faithful supporter of the Roman Catholic Church, but his reign was plagued by intrigue. He participated in raids on the English coast, and when his father, King Sweyn II, died, his brother, Harald III, was elected king of Denmark. Cnut went into exile in Sweden and may have led an opposition movement against his brother.

Harald's reign lasted only four years, and Cnut IV succeeded him as king, immediately imposing strict observance of church holy days and the collection of tithes to fatten the institution's coffers. He suppressed the power of noblemen and sought to vest the ownership of land and the estates of property owners without heirs in the monarchy. His subjects grew restive with such overbearing involvement of the crown in their daily lives. The great-nephew of Cnut the Great, who had ruled Denmark, Norway and England, Cnut IV renewed efforts to subjugate England; however, threats from the expansive Holy Roman Empire to the south preoccupied him and a military campaign was aborted.

"Sweyn Forkbeard raided England in reprisal for the St Brice's Day Massacre"

Once other matters settled down, Cnut IV again turned his attention to England, ordering an invasion fleet to assemble. However, before his command could be carried out, a peasant uprising occurred. Cnut fled to Schleswig and then to Odense, where he sought sanctuary in a church. Peasants discovered his hiding place and stormed the church. Cnut was mortally wounded by a lance thrust into his side and died shortly thereafter. Because of his apparent martyrdom and lifelong advocacy of the church, he was soon considered for sainthood. In 1101, he was canonised by Pope Paschal II, becoming the first Dane to achieve such status within the Roman Catholic Church.

Upon the death of Cnut IV, his brother, Olaf I, became king. During Olaf's reign crop failures were widespread and viewed by the faithful as retribution for the slaying of their devoutly religious king.

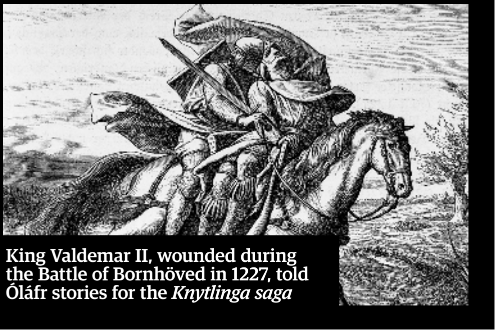
The *Knytlinga saga* stands as a landmark work among the Old Norse sagas. Not only does it preserve skaldic poetry that has not been found elsewhere, but its chronicle provides a valuable historic resource.

The White Poet

How Óláfr followed in the footsteps of his uncle

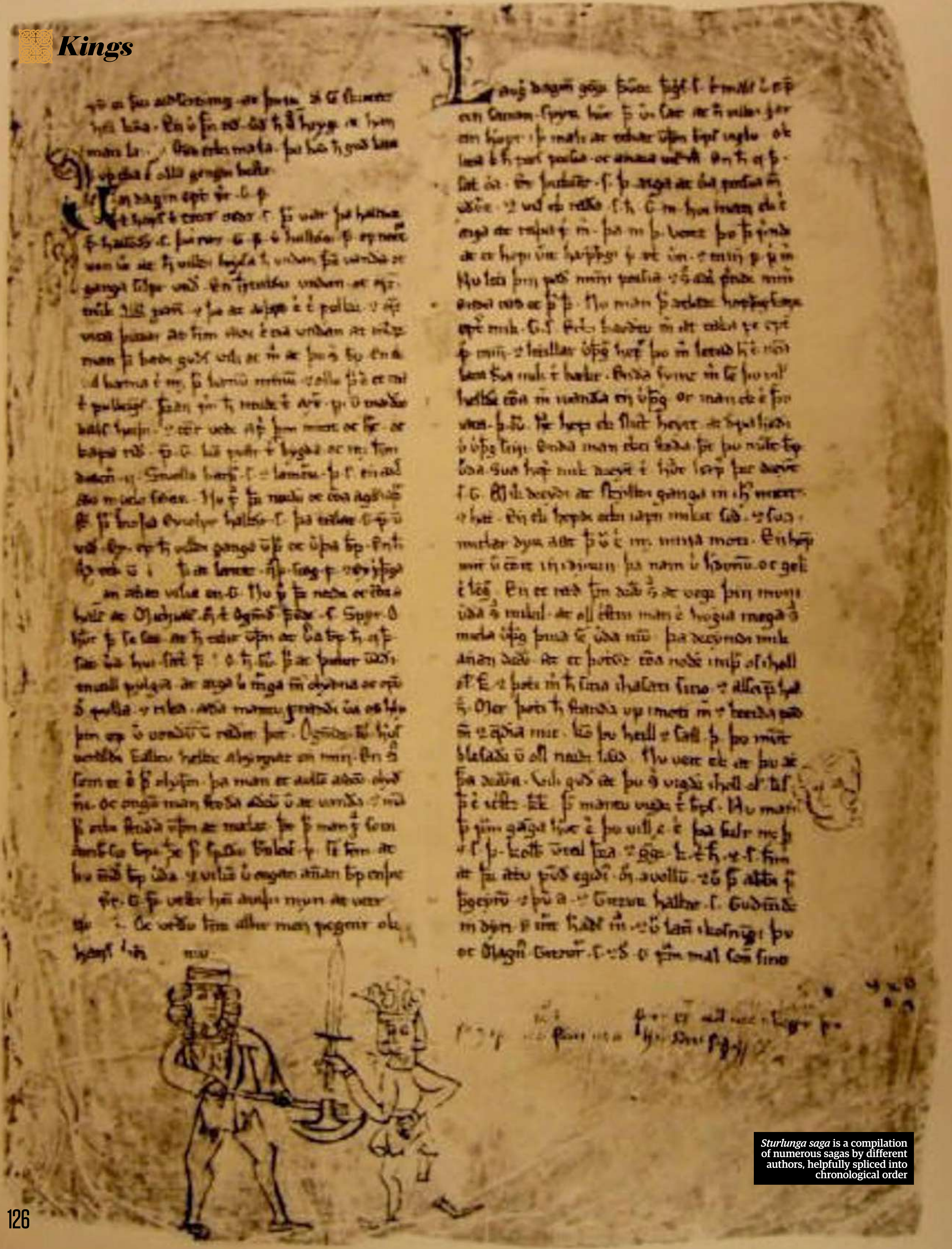
Although it borrows significantly from other works, the authorship of the *Knytlinga saga* is attributed to Óláfr Þórðarson, a native of Iceland believed to have lived between 1210 and 1259. He was nicknamed 'Hvítaskáld', or the 'White Poet', and was the nephew of another prominent skald, Snorri Sturluson, who was also a politician, historian and Law Speaker in the Icelandic parliament during the 13th century. As a boy, Óláfr lived with Snorri and there received much of his education. After his father died, he lived at the court of Norwegian King Haakon IV and with nobleman Jarl Skule. He served as an attendant to Haakon during a period of civil war.

Óláfr's *Knytlinga saga* was influenced by Snorri's saga of Norwegian kings, *Heimskringla*, and Óláfr also wrote the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, a linguistic work on Old Norse language. During 1240-1241, Óláfr resided with Danish King Valdemar II, who told him stories handed down through generations. After leaving Valdemar, Óláfr is believed to have lived with King Eric XI of Sweden. He returned to Iceland and served as Law Speaker from 1252 to 1256, prior to becoming a renowned skald, writing poems about the Scandinavian kings he had visited and using some of the material in the *Knytlinga saga.*



King Valdemar II, wounded during the Battle of Bornhöved in 1227, told Óláfr stories for the *Knytlinga saga*

© Alamy, Getty



Sturlunga saga is a compilation of numerous sagas by different authors, helpfully spliced into chronological order

SONGS OF ICE & FIRE

Sturlunga saga tells the stories of the political and personal struggles, particularly of the Sturlung clan, near the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth

Written by Michael Haskew

The Icelandic Commonwealth lasted for more than 300 years, ending in the mid-13th century with the island nation's final subjugation to the Norwegian throne. As the Commonwealth matured and then waned from 1100 to 1264, it was wracked by internal strife, division and civil war that presented opportunities for the Norwegian kings to exert greater control and intervention in Icelandic affairs.

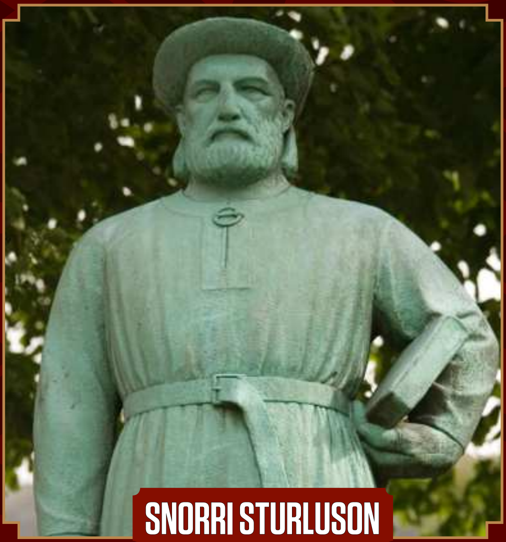
Sturlunga saga, a vast compilation of numerous sagas written by many authors that were assembled and tailored into a chronological progression, tells the stories of the most influential clans of Iceland during this violent period. Evidence suggests that it was collected and edited around 1300 by Þórðr Narfason, a lawman who died in 1308, although this conclusion is uncertain. More than half of *Sturlunga saga* recounts the story of the Sturlung clan, one of at least six prominent families in Iceland at the time. It is contained in *Íslendinga saga*, which was probably written by Sturla Þórðarson, a prominent Icelandic chieftain and political figure credited with authoring several sagas during the mid- to late-13th century. Sturla describes the individual struggles and intrigue along with the strife and shifting balance of power in the political arena that characterised the twilight of the Icelandic Commonwealth period. Often referred to simply as *Sturlunga*, the compilation opens with *Geirmundar þáttr heljarskinns*, a legend of the emigration to Iceland of Geirmundr Heljarskinn, a nobleman of Norway who sought to escape the burgeoning authority of King Harald Fairhair.

From this tale that is believed to include folklore and fables that are unverified, *Sturlunga* moves to more definitive historical texts. The compiler chose to replace some beginnings and endings, while also extracting excerpts from more than one component in the individual sagas and placing them elsewhere to fit more seamlessly into the chronological text. *Sturlunga* is the primary source of the history of Iceland during the 12th and 13th centuries and ends with the assertion of Norway's authority over the island around 1264. Two period examples of the manuscript, *Króksfjarðarbók* and *Reykjafjarðarbók*, both considered defective, vary in content, suggesting that gaps may exist due to lost information or mistakes in transcription. *Króksfjarðarbók* includes information from *Hákonar saga* about King Haakon IV of Norway, while *Reykjafjarðarbók* contains additional sagas, two of which are not typically considered components of *Sturlunga*.

The Age of the Sturlungs spanned nearly 50 years of Icelandic history in the mid-13th century. It was a period of tremendous upheaval and bloodshed, as prominent local chieftains called goðar retained most of the power during the Icelandic Commonwealth. Iceland was split into fjörðungar (farthings, which were essentially quarters), and within each quarter Goðorð, or dominions, were established. The largest territory in the north encompassed 12 dominions, while the others each had nine – a total of 39 Goðorð. In exchange for the chieftain's protection, villagers and farmers would vote in favour of their chieftain for a seat in the Alþingi, the Icelandic parliament.

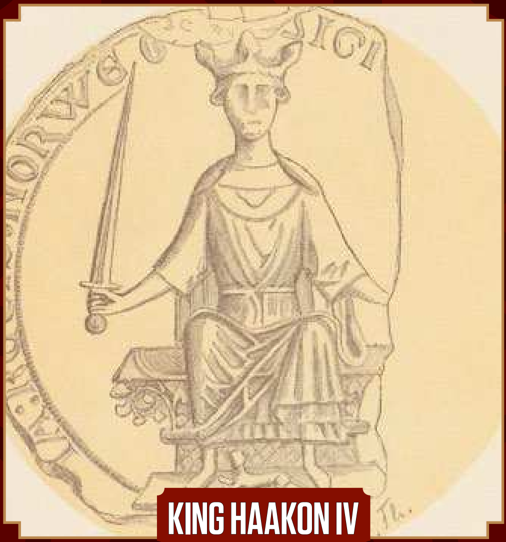
THE POET'S CLAN

Just three of the many players in *Sturlunga*



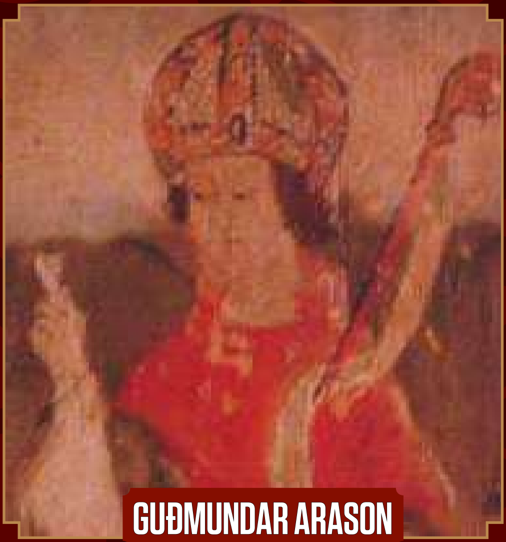
SNORRI STURLUSON

Snorri had pledged his allegiance to Norway's King Haakon IV but was unsuccessful in persuading the people of Iceland to devote themselves to the Norwegian monarch. This meant he lost favour with the king, and he returned to Norway. Later, Haakon refused to allow Snorri to go back to Iceland. Ignoring the king's order, Snorri returned with the help of Haakon's rival, Earl Skúli. On Haakon's decree, Snorri was murdered.



KING HAAKON IV

Haakon ruled Norway for 46 years. During his reign, Norway reached the height of its power and prestige, even though Haakon was continually involved in strife. He acceded to the throne at the age of 13 and his later rival, Earl Skúli, served as his regent. One of his primary aims was to subjugate Iceland, and while he accomplished that, it caused much upheaval and civil war. Haakon remains a controversial ruler to this day.



GUÐMUNDAR ARASON

Born an illegitimate child in 1161, Guðmundar rose to become a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church. He believed the church had unjustly enriched itself, and endeavoured to spread its wealth among the needy. Guðmundar's story in *Sturlunga saga* was probably presented during an effort to have him canonised. Although he is revered as something of a 'national saint' in Iceland, the church has never bestowed sainthood upon him.

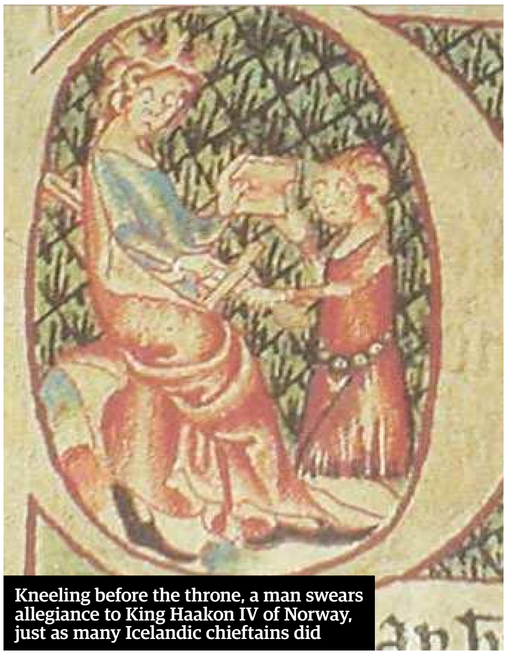
The positions of the chieftains were never fully secure. They were required to regularly demonstrate their power, authority and benevolence in swift action, hosting celebrations and feasts, and fostering a sense of security. While some chieftains grew stronger, others were weakened. Rivalries intensified and were a significant cause of the internal strife that made Iceland vulnerable to outside interference during the period.

In 1220, Snorri Sturluson, one of the great chieftains of the Sturlung clan and a prolific author of sagas in his own right, pledged his allegiance to King Haakon IV of Norway. Subsequently, Haakon persuaded Snorri to help bring Iceland into the Norwegian sphere of influence. After travelling to Norway, Snorri returned home and concentrated more on increasing his own power than paving the way for Norway's hegemony. Snorri's nephew, Sturla Sighvatsson, also became a vassal of King Haakon; however, by 1235 he had become quite zealous in the fulfilment of his own pledge to the Norwegian monarch.

According to *Sturlunga*, Sturla ordered his uncle to return to Norway, perhaps to placate any concerns raised by Haakon, and then made war against any chieftains who refused to follow his lead in subservience to the Norwegian crown. Sturla's bid for increased favour with Haakon led to ruin in the great Battle of Örlygsstaðir, fought on August 21, 1238. Sturla and his father, Sighvatur Sturluson, were soundly defeated by the opposing forces of the Ásbirningar and Haukdælir clans. Örlygsstaðir was the largest battle in the history of Iceland. More than 50 members of the Sturlung clan were killed, including Sturla and Sighvatur. Kolbeinn ungi Arnórsson and Gissur Þorvaldsson, the leaders of the opposing clans, lost only seven soldiers that day, all of them from Gissur's Haukdælir clan. These allies then dominated the country, although they remained loyal to King Haakon in Norway.

> "Örlygsstaðir was the largest battle in the history of Iceland. More than 50 members of the Sturlung clan were killed"

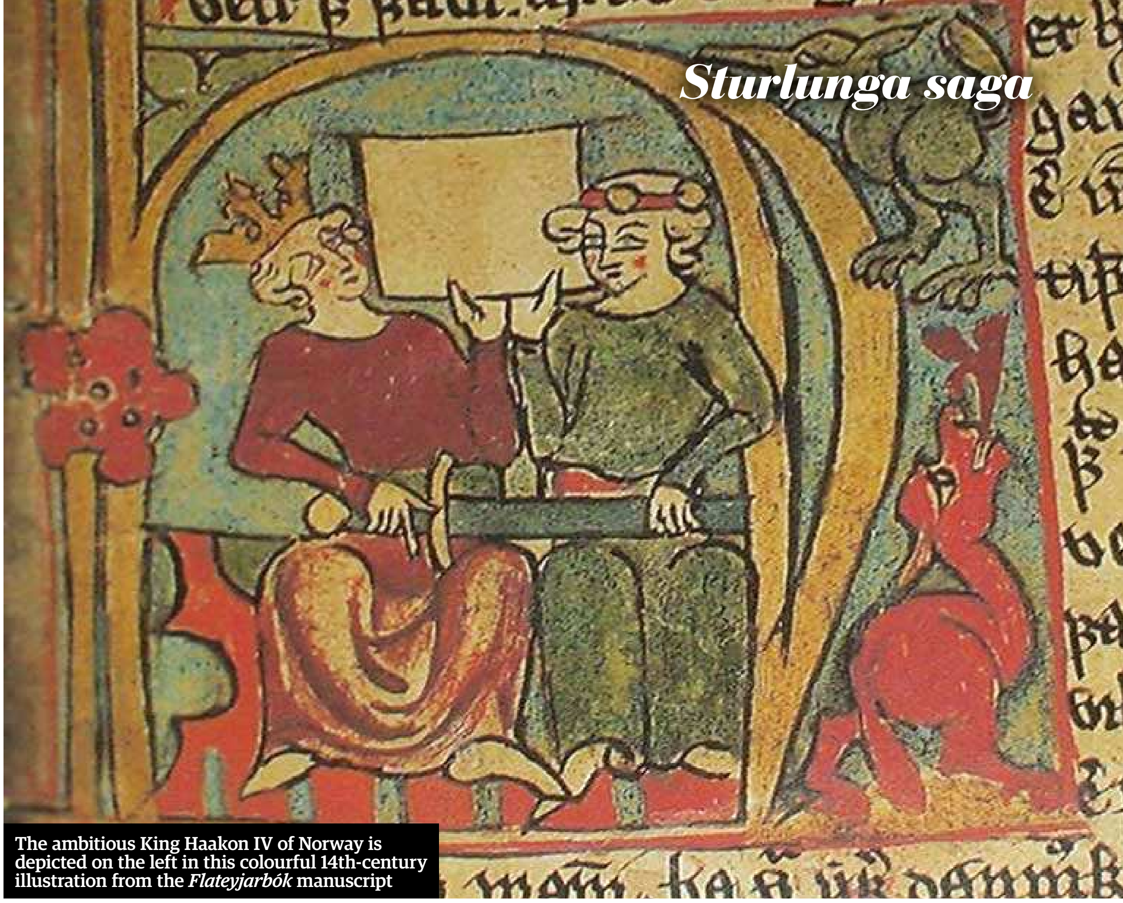
Meanwhile, Snorri's position at Haakon's court became precarious. He was suspected of treachery for supporting a coup attempt led by Earl Skúli, and he had failed in his primary mission to bring Iceland under more direct Norwegian control. Snorri returned to Iceland sometime after the Battle of Örlygsstaðir, but his days were numbered. *Sturlunga* says that around 1241 Gissur Þorvaldsson, who happened to be Snorri's former son-in-law, received orders from the Norwegian king to murder him. Following his instructions, Gissur took a large contingent of men



Kneeling before the throne, a man swears allegiance to King Haakon IV of Norway, just as many Icelandic chieftains did

to Snorri's home and killed him in his cellar. The last words of the piteous Snorri were: "Do not strike!"

Vengeance became the overriding theme when Þórður kakali Sighvatsson, another son of Sighvatur, returned home from Norway in 1242 and began to marshal forces around Iceland to retaliate against his enemies for the deaths of his brother and father, who had fallen in the Battle of Örlygsstaðir. In a bid to reclaim lands that had belonged to his family, Þórður encountered the forces of Kolbeinn while at sea. The outcome of the naval Battle of the Gulf in Iceland's Húnaflói bay was a bloody draw, but Kolbeinn did suffer greater casualties. Kolbeinn died a year later, and his army fell under the command of a relative, Brandur Kolbeinsson, but Þórður's forces continued to grow in strength.


The ambitious King Haakon IV of Norway is depicted on the left in this colourful 14th-century illustration from the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript

The Battle of Haugsnes, fought April 19, 1246, was the bloodiest armed contest in the history of Iceland, and more than 100 men died on the field. Þórður claimed victory, gained his revenge, and became the strongest chieftain in Iceland. He never fought Gissur Þorvaldsson. Since both were bound in fealty to King Haakon of Norway, the two chieftains appealed to the king to settle their differences. Haakon sided with Þórður, who controlled Iceland from 1247 to 1250, but Gissur was given an office in Norway. Soon enough, though, King Haakon summoned Þórður back to Norway, where he could more easily control the greatest threat to his own overarching authority. Þórður died in Norway about six years later. He had never returned to Iceland.

Around 1252, Haakon called upon Gissur to exert more influence in Iceland on his behalf, sending him home from Norway. Gissur tried to make peace with the Sturlungar clan, and married off his eldest son, Hallur, to Ingibjörg, the daughter of Sturla Þórðarson (the presumed author of *Íslendinga saga*) of the Sturlungar clan. Not everyone in the Sturlungar clan approved of the match, however, and, a couple of days after the wedding, they burned down Gissur's homestead. Twenty-five people died in the fire, including Gissur's wife, Gróa, and three sons. Gissur survived by climbing into a barrel of whey. He sought revenge on the perpetrators but Eyjólfur, the leader of the attackers, escaped him. Gissur was recalled to Norway to face the wrath of Haakon, but instead of meting out harsh punishment, the king dispatched Gissur to Iceland once again in 1258, this time with the title Earl of Iceland, hoping that he could negotiate a peaceful transfer of full Norwegian sovereignty over the country. Later, an envoy named Hallvarður gullskór was sent to hasten in the negotiations. Finally, in 1264, the Icelandic Commonwealth came to an end with the Old Covenant agreement (also known as Gissurarsáttmáli, after Gissur) affirming the dominion of King Haakon of Norway over Iceland.

Among the numerous sagas - at least eight of them - that constitute *Sturlunga saga*, *Guðmundar saga biskups* is an example of a tale that is told in several different versions. Because several variants of the story survive today, it is also common to speak of this saga in the plural. The saga tells the story of Bishop Guðmundur Arason, who lived from 1161 to 1237.

The first version was written after Guðmundur's death, probably at the request of another bishop. It describes Guðmundur's childhood, life as a young man, and joining of the priesthood. However, it ends rather abruptly while discussing Guðmundur's voyage in 1202 from Iceland to Norway for consecration, and some historians consider it to be an unfinished manuscript, which survives through its incorporation with later versions of the biography and its inclusion in *Sturlunga saga*.

The complete series of *Guðmundar saga biskups* was written between 1314 and 1344, probably amid a vigorous campaign to promote Guðmundur for sainthood. Often referred to as Guðmundar the Good, the bishop was generous and displayed real concern for the common people of Iceland. He believed that by amassing wealth, the church had gone astray from its central purpose, and sought to relieve suffering through kindness. In doing so, he advanced the stature of the Roman Catholic Church in Iceland. While he was a champion of the poor, Guðmundur gained the enmity of some chieftains who felt their authority was being eroded. Controversy ensued, and after spending the years 1214 to 1218 in Norway under the supervision of the archbishop, he approached his task on a more prudent and measured basis.

Despite the fact that *Sturlunga saga* is a compilation of several sagas that have been edited, spliced and chronologically joined, while containing some elements that are linked to legends and others that are firmly rooted in truth, it remains an invaluable historical document, offering the best available resource on the turbulent period of civil war in Iceland that preceded the absolute domination of the country by Norway.

The author Sturla Þórðarson

From a skaldic clan

Sturla Þórðarson was the most likely author of *Íslendinga saga*, which makes up more than half of *Sturlunga saga*, and it's considered to be his best-known and most widely read work. Aside from writing sagas of King Haakon IV of Norway and his son, Magnus the Lawmender, he may also have written *Kristni saga*, an account of the coming of Christianity to Iceland in the 10th century. He's also believed to have written *Sturlubók*, a transcription of the ancient *Landnáma*, which recounts the settlement of Iceland by Nordic peoples in the 9th and 10th centuries.

Sturla was born in 1214, the son of a nobleman and his mistress. He was named Law Speaker of Iceland for a time shortly after the Icelandic Commonwealth came to an end and the island nation was subjugated under the rule of King Haakon. He also authored *Járnsíða*, a law book used by Magnus the Lawmender to reform the justice code of Norway. Sturla was instrumental in introducing reforms to the Alþingi, the Icelandic national assembly. In *Skáldatal*, he is listed as a skald in the court of the Swedish ruler Birger Jarl. Sturla, who died in 1284, was also the brother of Óláfr Þórðarson, another prominent skald who lived from 1210 to 1259. Both men were nephews of famed skald and politician Snorri Sturluson and gained much of their education from him.

Sturla Þórðarson is widely accepted as the author of *Íslendinga saga*, and if this is indeed the case, he wrote about himself in the third person

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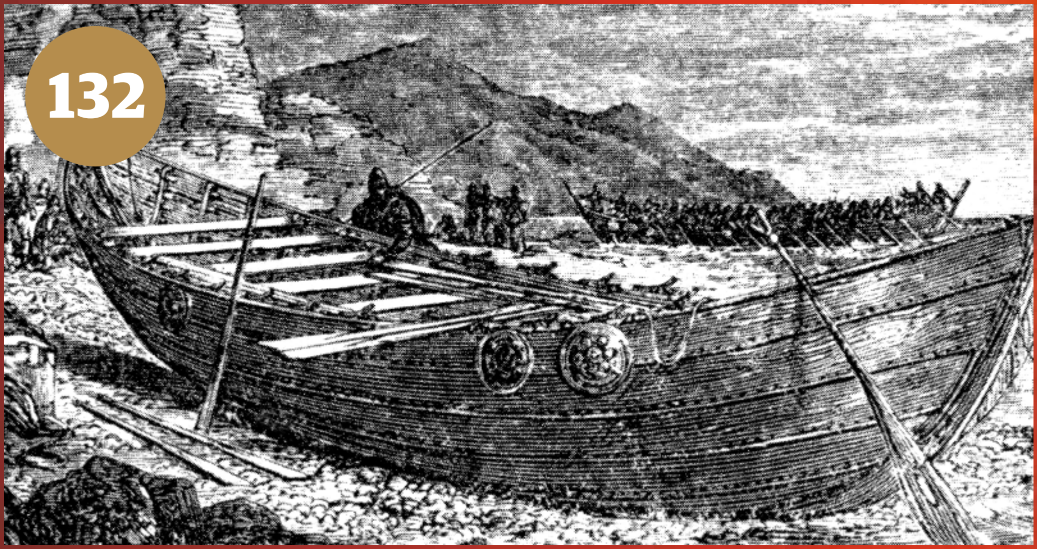
VOYAGES

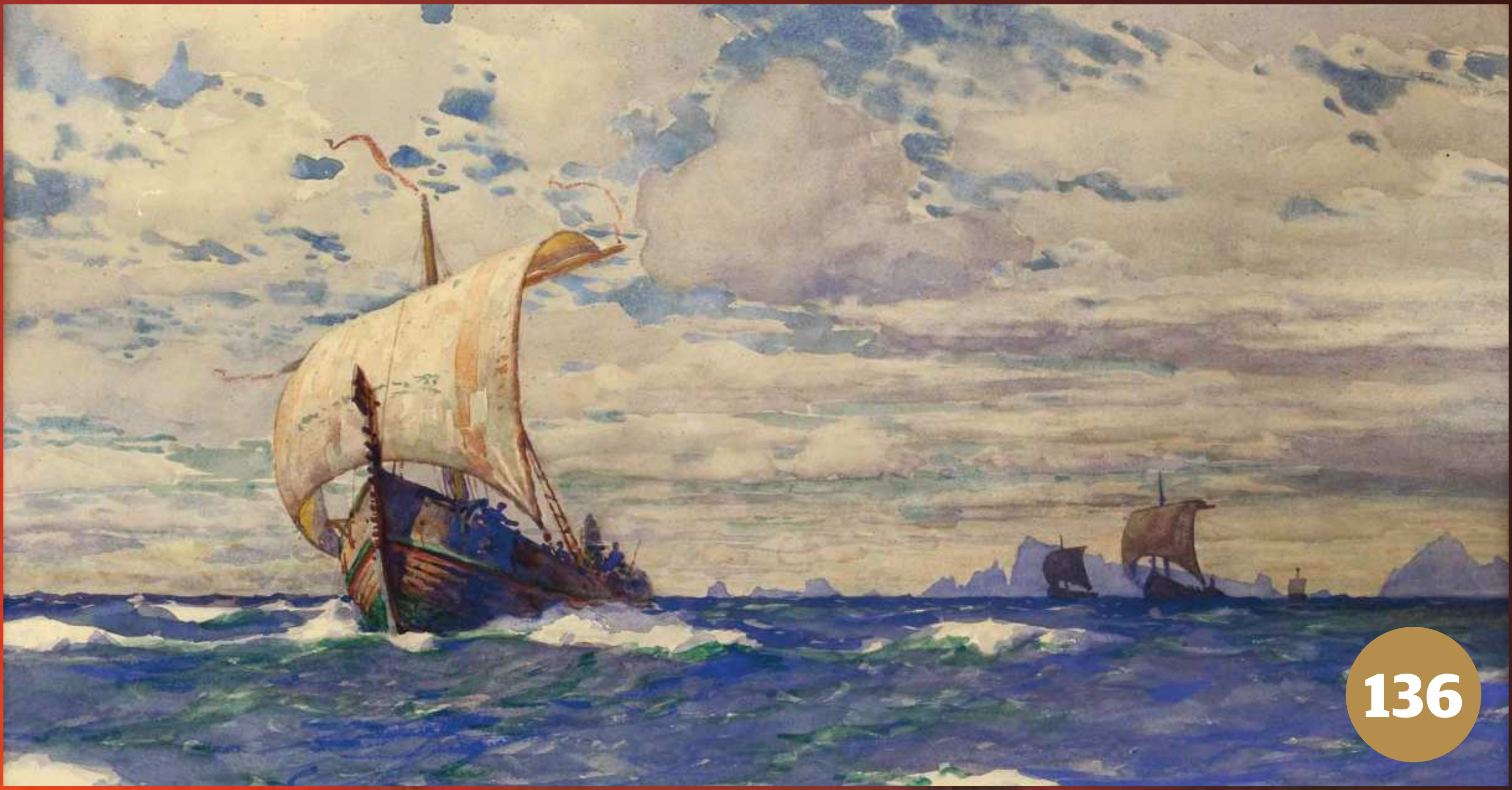
Viking longships enabled them to explore the limits of the known world – and beyond

132 **Yngvars saga viðförla**
Yngvar the Far-Travelled ventured eastwards into Russia and Asia on his astonishing adventures

136 **Groenlendinga saga**
Leif Eriksson and his brothers and sister were among the first Vikings to reach North America



> “They discovered rich rivers and lakes in an abundant land”



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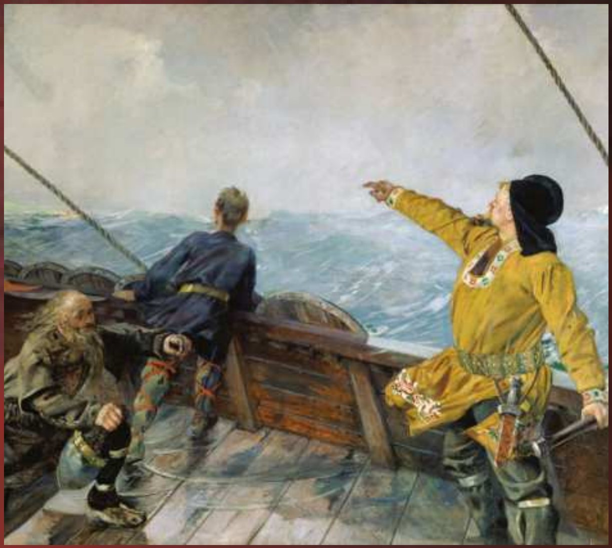

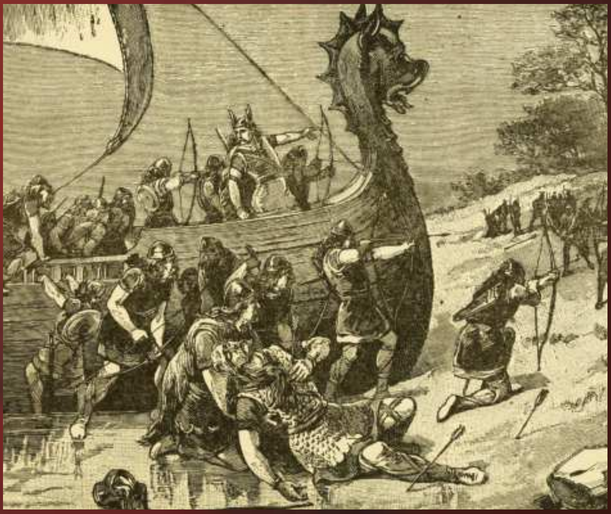

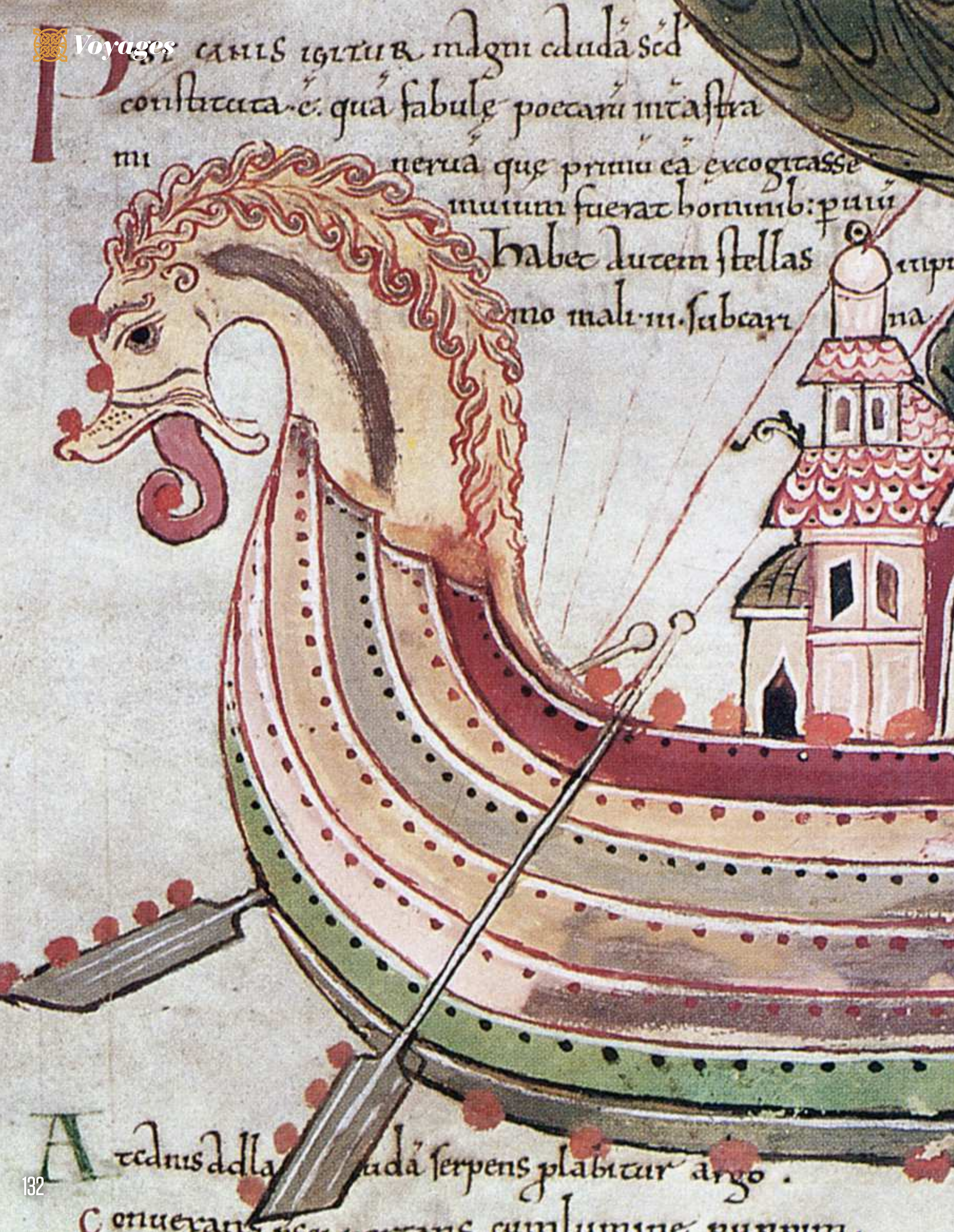

P canis igitur magni cauda sed
constituta .e. quā fabule poetarū in astra
mi nerua que primū ea excogitasse
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Habet autem stellas
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At canis ad la udā serpens plabitur argo .
Conuexans cum lumine

Viking longships enabled explorers to cover vast distances and discover new and strange lands

VOYAGES INTO THE UNKNOWN

Dragons, fantastic ships, and legendary exploits make the saga of Ingvar the Far-Travelled and his father, Eymundr, an incredible story of fact and fiction

Written by Michael Haskew

The ancient runestones bear evidence of a great expedition that ultimately ended in failure. They tell of friends and family members who set off for the East and died there. And from those times of long ago, the experience of the men who took part has become epic, replete with stories of fantastic dragons, ethereal beings, and great heroism.

Like so many stories of the Vikings and ancient Nordic peoples, the saga of Ingvar the Far-Travelled and his father, Eymundr, is an absorbing drama of fact leavened with a healthy dose of fiction and fantasy. The central aspect of the tale is an expedition led by Ingvar to the East sometime between 1036 and 1042 CE. The Swedish Viking explorers, possibly numbering 700 men in 30 ships, probably launched their voyage from their homeland, travelling down the great River Volga to the region of the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, territory occupied by the Saracens.

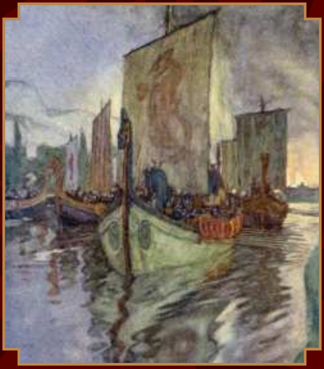
The runestone record explains that Ingvar's company included sea captains, navigators, and oarsmen who would venture into an unknown land with their leader, and relates that few or none of the participants ultimately survived the dangerous trek. The reason for the expedition may have simply been one of discovery, or possibly an economic drive in search of a trade route to Central Asia, when parts of the important Volga route were contested by adversarial Tatarian forces.

Setting the stage for Ingvar's travels, the saga begins with the tale of his father, Eymundr. Viking-born, Eymund is said to be the son of a Swedish chieftain named Aki and the daughter of King Eric the Victorious, although other theories for Ingvar's lineage exist. Aki wanted to marry this daughter, who had already been promised to a Russian provincial king. Impetuously, Aki travelled to Russia, killed his rival, and then had a son, Eymundr, with the princess. At first, King Eric does not retaliate, but later invites Aki and eight other chieftains who had been in league with him to a great feast. At the height of the merriment, Eric has Aki and the others murdered.

When Eymundr reaches adulthood, he takes his own vengeance, killing the royal tax collectors who have come to receive payment on the lands that once belonged to Aki. Eymundr becomes a fugitive but is later pardoned by Swedish King Olof Skötkonung. He returns to his father's land, increasing his wealth and prestige tremendously, and marries the daughter of a wealthy man of the country. Their son, Ingvar, grows up on this land and earns the friendship and favour of both King Olof and his son, Prince Anund.

BOLD ADVENTURERS

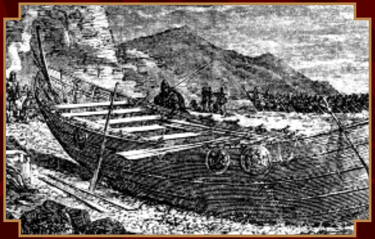
Setting sail for new lands



INGVAR THE FAR-TRAVELLED

Ingvar the Far-Travelled left an enduring saga of adventure, romance, danger, and tragedy. Although it is somewhat skewed toward fantasy because of its encounters with giants, pirate ships that look like islands, and dragons, the saga of Ingvar the Far-Travelled is indicative of the spirit of the Vikings. The saga suggests that Ingvar was only 25 years of age when he died far from home; however, the story of the adventure survived him to be embellished and then passed to future generations. The saga is based on a person who actually lived, and when he left the realm of King Olof to make a name for himself, the real Ingvar succeeded in his quest - quite probably beyond his own expectations.

According to the saga's text, Ingvar achieved a status among the people of Sweden that rivalled the nation's most famous heroes. "...Wise men have likened him in accomplishments to his kinsman Styrbjorn, or to King Olaf Tryggvason, who was the most renowned man there ever was or will be in the northlands, for ever and aye, before God and men." Still, Ingvar was a man, and perhaps his greatest character flaw was his own ambition, one which drove him to depart King Olof's court, and which eventually cost him his life.



SVEIN INGVARSSON

During the winter that followed the return of Ingvar's cohort, Ketil, young Svein, Ingvar's son, set out to visit Queen Silkisif. He readied 30 boats and set off, dispatching a force of 'heathens' (non-Christians, though the term heathen is specific to the Norse) many times the size of his own contingent after placing his fate in the hands of God and swearing to give up raiding if his men were handed a victory. After God instructed him to stand and fight, Svein destroyed the enemy.

After following the trail his father had blazed before him, Svein had many adventures, fighting giants and plundering their wealth, trading with natives, and battling enemies of unknown origin while invoking the power of God. Like his father, Svein encountered Jaculus the dragon. When the beast rose up to attack the adventurers, Svein ordered a flaming arrow lit with consecrated tinder. He loosed the single shot into the dragon's mouth, and it pierced its heart, killing the dragon instantly. When Svein arrived in the realm of Silkisif, he assisted in converting the entire domain to Christianity and then married the queen. Svein remained in the country for three years and then returned to Sweden, where he refused the throne. Two years later he was last seen sailing back toward the land of Silkisif.

"Ingvar was a man great in stature, handsome and strong and fair faced, wise and well-spoken...."

The saga says, "...Ingvar was always with the king because the king loved him no less than his own son. Ingvar was a man great in stature, handsome and strong and fair faced, wise and well-spoken, kind and generous with his friends, but grim with his enemies, courteous and quick and alert..."

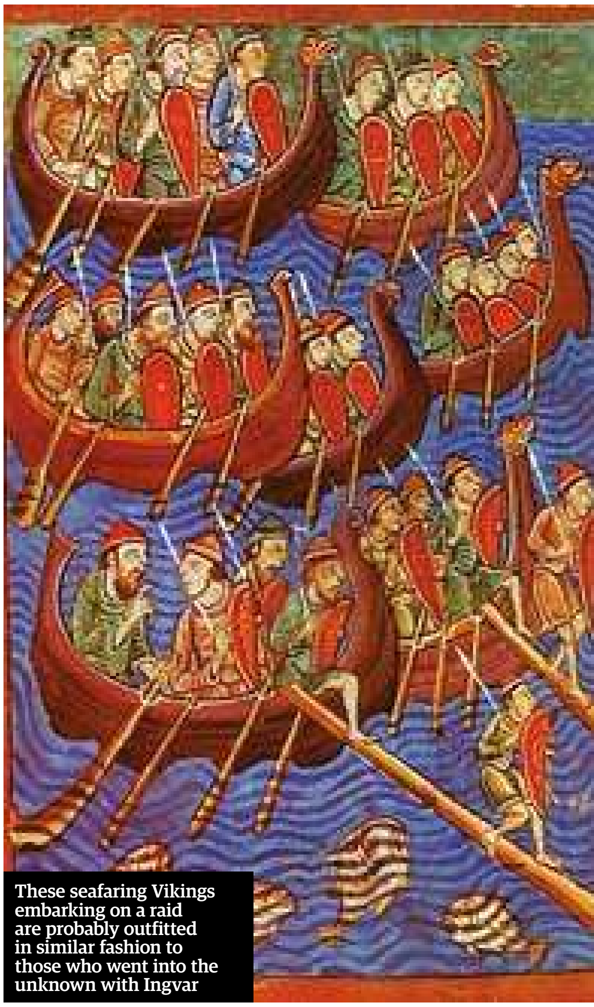
So close was the relationship that Ingvar prevailed upon King Olof to bestow the title of king on him. When Olof explained that he could not, Invgar is said to have decided to embark on the eastern voyage. Hearing that Ingvar intended to depart, Olof relented and offered him a kingly title. However, Ingvar responded that it was too late. His expedition was set to depart with the favourable winds.

The Vikings sailed until they reached Russia, and one night as he kept watch, a close associate of Ingvar named Ketil decided to leave his ship - against orders - and explore the surrounding countryside. He came upon a large house, and inside was a pot boiling above a fire. Ketil grabbed the pot and set out for his ship, rousing the homeowner, a giant who pursued him vigorously but gave up the chase after Ketil dropped the pot. Ingvar spared Ketil's life and did not punish him for disobeying orders.

As the expedition sailed on, another friend of Ingvar's, Valdimar, was captivated one night by a vision that resembled a half-moon descending to the earth. Valdimar went in search of its origin and found a hill the colour of gold and covered in snakes. Valdimar retrieved a gold ring with his staff, and immediately a small snake woke up. Swiftly all the snakes were alerted. Valdimar fled for his ship as the great dragon Jakulus awakened and took flight. Ingvar raised the alarm to defend against the creature, but when he approached Jakulus spat venom that destroyed one of the boats. Sensibly, Ingvar departed.

After sailing several days, Ingvar came upon a gleaming city of white marble and encountered a beautiful woman who introduced herself as Queen Silkisif. She welcomed the travellers, who remained with her through the following winter, and fell in love with Ingvar, who introduced her to Christianity. According to the saga, "Ingvar was always telling her about almighty God, and it appealed to her, this faith. She loved Ingvar so much that she offered him the whole kingdom and the title of king, and finally offered to give herself to him if he would stay there, but he explained that first he wanted to explore the length of the river and would accept after that."

When spring came, the Vikings set sail once again, encountering a king named Jolf, who welcomed them. When Ingvar inquired about the source of the great river, Jolf responded that it was a distant spring called Lindibelti and warned that if Ingvar intended to continue his voyage there were perils ahead.



These seafaring Vikings embarking on a raid are probably outfitted in similar fashion to those who went into the unknown with Ingvar

This shallow-draft ship called a knorr may have been the type used by Ingvar's voyagers during their long expedition down the River Volga

Trouble brewed as Jolf's people felt neglected when their king gave such attention to Ingvar, who promised to help fight an insurrection led by Jolf's rebel brother, on his return from the realm downstream.

Passing a treacherous waterfall, the Vikings sailed around high cliffs and dug a canal for their ships to bypass a difficult stretch of the river. They came upon the footprint of a giant on the shore and then saw a tremendous house with the hideous giant sitting next to it. They prayed that the giant would not discover them, and when he walked away they went to the house and chopped at its pillars to weaken the structure. The giant returned later with many dead men hanging from his belt, sat down, and ate them. He then fell asleep, and Ingvar ordered his men to hurl large stones at the weakened pillars. The house collapsed on the giant, who struggled to get to his feet. The Vikings attacked, chopping one of his feet with their battleaxes and killing him. They carried the severed foot to the ships and preserved it in salt.

The Vikings sailed to a fork in the river and came upon what appeared to be five islands moving toward them. Soon they realised the islands were actually pirate ships, and a battle was joined. Ingvar watched as a hail of stones fell around his ships. The pirates then began pumping a large bellows, and a stream of flame sped from a bronze tube, consuming one of the Viking ships, which burned to the waterline. Prior to his departure, Ingvar had asked priests to consecrate his voyage and the implements that he might need. Among these was a flint that was used to make fire. Ingvar ordered a bow and arrow and then set it alight with fire from the consecrated flint. He loosed the arrow, which flew into the bronze tube, and a great fire erupted, killing every pirate aboard the ship. In turn, as each pirate ship came up to do battle, Ingvar dispatched it in the same manner through God's providence.

When they reached the headwaters of the river, Ingvar and the Vikings encountered an immense dragon guarding a tremendous cache of gold. Ingvar instructed his men to find the dragon's source of water. They sprinkled salt along the path to its drinking place and dragged the giant's foot ashore. When the dragon walked down the path, it stopped to lick salt several times and ate the severed foot. Meanwhile, the Vikings plundered the unguarded gold. When the dragon returned, Ingvar ordered his men to ignore the threat. Those who disregarded the order watched the dragon rise up on its tail, spin around in a circle and make a noise that sounded like a whistling man. Those who looked at the sight told the others what they had seen and immediately fell dead. The others made good their escape.

These are a few of the fantastic adventures Ingvar and his companions experienced. A climactic encounter with the Devil himself provided warnings of danger ahead, and during their return voyage the Vikings supported King Jolf against his brother only to find Jolf turning against them after his brother had been defeated. After fighting off Jolf's forces, the Vikings were approached by bewitching women who tried to seduce them. Ingvar stabbed his assailant, but others succumbed. Eighteen Vikings lost their lives to these treacherous siren-like women.

The saga reports that shortly after this encounter a terrible sickness ravaged the Viking company, claiming Ingvar's life in the year 1041. Those who survived brought his body to Queen Silkisif, who buried it with Christian reverence. "He is my God, he who is yours," she told the Vikings. "Take my greetings to Ingvar's kin when you come to Sweden and ask some of them to come here with preachers and christen this people, and then a church shall be built here where Ingvar shall rest."

While runestones indicate that there were no survivors of the voyage, the saga relates that Ketil lived, bringing much of the wealth the Vikings had amassed to Ingvar's son, Svein, who soon embarked on his own expedition and had similar adventures. Fantasy aside, however, Ingvar really did visit places as diverse as Persia, Asia, India, Armenia and Russia, so the 'Far-Travelled' epithet is not misplaced at all.

"When they reached the headwaters of the river, Ingvar and the Vikings encountered an immense dragon"

Runestones and records

Runestones were markers set up to record and honour the deeds of warriors and explorers, and were usually erected by a family after a Viking's death. The authorship of the saga of Ingvar the Far-Travelled is believed to be a compilation of writings found on numerous runestones and from three works by the eminent Icelandic skald and political figure Sturla Þórðarson, along with *Ingvars saga viðförla*, a legend that is believed to have been written first in Latin during the 12th century by Oddr Snorrason, a 12th century Benedictine monk who lived in Iceland. Those sagas written by Sturla mention Ingvar's death from an unidentified disease in the year 1041 AD, and for years there was a healthy skepticism as to the accuracy of the *Ingvars saga viðförla* narrative, although scholars have given this theory greater acceptance in recent years.

The runestones that commemorate the great voyage of Ingvar are located primarily in the Lake Mälaren region of Uppland Province in the area of the Swedish capital of Stockholm. While a few mention more than one expedition conducted into the region of the Caspian Sea between 864 and 1041 CE, most of them are dedicated to the adventures of Ingvar and his company, who may have all perished during the hazardous voyage. The stones suggest that Ingvar attempted to establish trade connections and that the Vikings took part in the Battle of Sasireti in modern-day Georgia in the year 1042. If this runic inscription is historically accurate, the travellers remained active even after Ingvar's death.

The runestones erected by later generations of Vikings paid homage to wayfarers such as Ingvar the Far-Travelled and have been well preserved through the centuries

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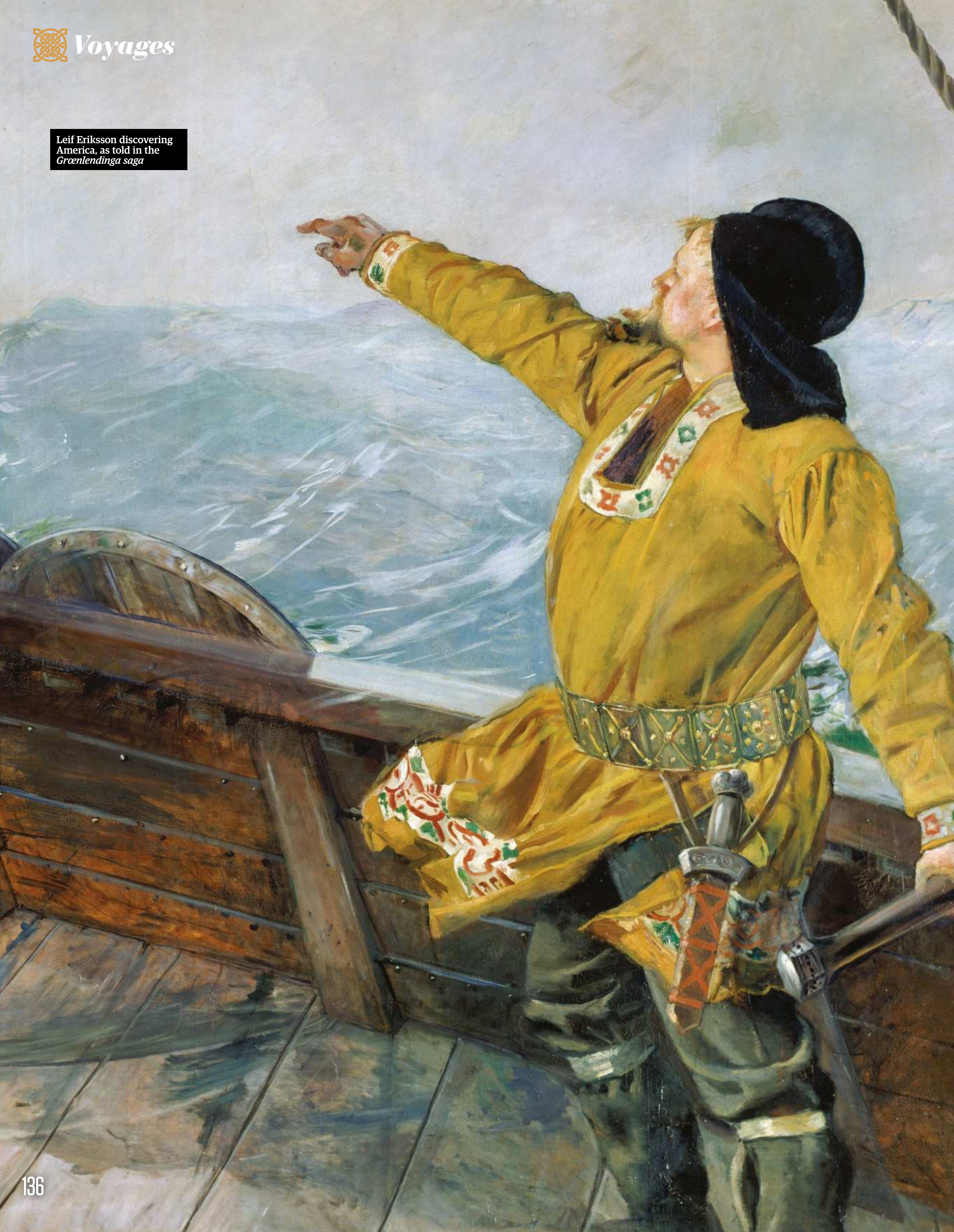


Leif Eriksson discovering America, as told in the *Grœnlendinga saga*

C. KROHG
1893

VINLAND THE GOOD

Hundreds of years before Columbus, the Norse were the first Europeans in North America

Written by Ben Gazur

The famed longships of the Norse were perfectly designed to skim the rough seas of the North Atlantic. On board could be a band of warriors bent on conquest or a community ready to settle some newly discovered land. Having colonised Iceland in the 9th century it was only a matter of time before the Norse ships strayed even further westward. In the *Grœnlendinga saga*, we have the Norse account of expeditions into North America.

Erik the Red and Greenland

When charges of manslaughter were brought against Erik the Red and his father, Thorvald, the pair fled their home in Norway. Crossing the sea, they joined those Norse who had already settled in the aptly, if uninvitingly, named Iceland. Here Thorvald died, while Erik the Red married and raised his sons, Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein, and his daughter, Freydis, who would all play such important roles in the Norse voyages into the West.

Erik's violent past was not left behind in Norway. After killing Eyiulf the Foul and the famed dueller Hrafn, Erik and his family had to move on again. A change of scenery did not end the quarrels. A fight over a loaned set of wooden beams erupted between Erik and a man named Thorgest. Others took sides in the dispute and battles and bloodshed resulted. A meeting of the people in the area declared Erik an outlaw. Clearly, Erik needed a new home again.

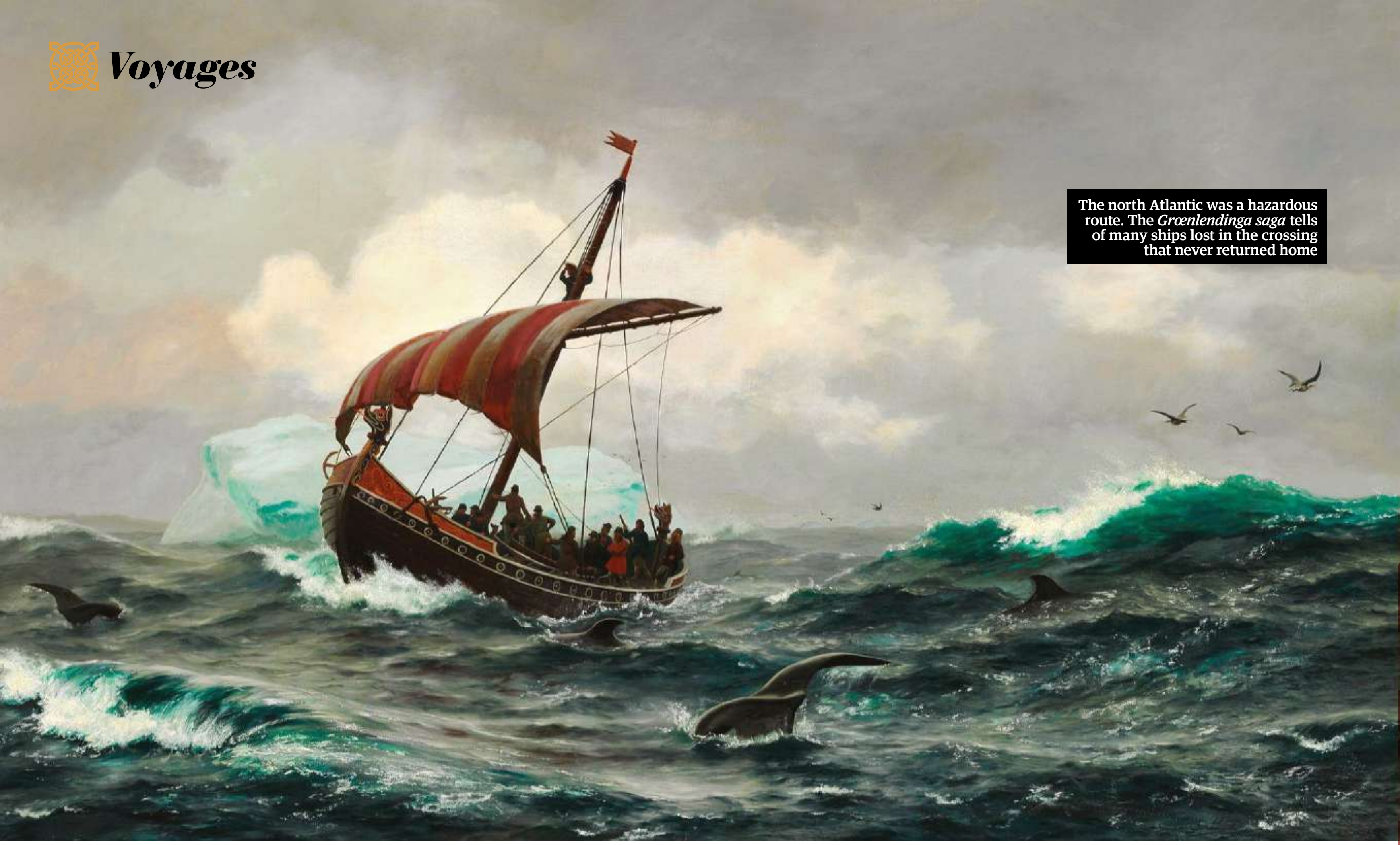
Word had reached Erik of a land beyond the western sea so he equipped a ship for a voyage and gathered a crew for this chancy trip. To his friends he promised that he would return if he succeeded in discovering this land below the horizon. He left it unspoken as to what fate would befall his crew on the ocean if he failed to locate it.

From Iceland, Erik struck land quickly and he named the spot Blacksark. A vast wilderness of rock and towering mountains of ice seemed to loom over this new country. Glaciers spilled down into the churning ocean. In the summers Erik led his crew on expeditions to locate sites for settlements. In the winters, they dug in to survive the biting cold. After three years, Erik sailed once more for Iceland to tell people of his discoveries. When he told the tales of his voyage he named his newfound land of ice and stone Greenland - saying that a country with a good name would be more attractive. The next summer Erik returned to his Greenland, trailed by another 35 ships. Only 14 made it safely to their new home.

While his father Erik was colonising Greenland, Leif sailed back to Norway. He visited King Olaf and this Christian monarch preached the new faith to Leif. Leif was taken with Christianity and, along with his crew, was baptised before returning west in search of his father.

Bjarni's voyage west

While still a young man, Bjarni, a relative of one of the first settlers in Iceland, was filled with a desire to travel. Bjarni grew rich by plying his trading vessel between Norse settlements. Every other year he would set his sails for home, however, and spend a winter with his father, Herjólf. One winter, Herjólf decided to follow Erik to Greenland and the old man sold his farm. Among his crew was a Christian from the Hebrides who had composed a famous song about the dangers of the stormy sea and rolling waves that would face them. His song called on the Christian God to watch over the ship. Perhaps his song was heeded by the new god for despite the dangers of the voyage, the ship reached Greenland safely, and Herjólf settled there.



The north Atlantic was a hazardous route. The *Grœnlendinga saga* tells of many ships lost in the crossing that never returned home

"For many days and nights they had no notion of where they were going"

After a trading voyage that winter, Bjarni returned to Iceland to hear the news that his father had left Norway for Greenland. Perplexed, he decided to keep to his custom of spending the season with his father and turned his ship towards the west. Bjarni asked if his crew would follow him and not a man left his service despite Bjarni warning: "Our voyage must be regarded as foolhardy, seeing that not one of us has ever been in the Greenland Sea."

They soon discovered how foolhardy they had been when all of the dangers listed in the Christian's song were visited on them. For three days they sailed until the land they had left behind was hidden by the water. The good wind that had eased them across the waves fell and a terrible north wind started to blow. A fog descended that hid the sky from them. For many days and nights they had no notion of where they were going. When the Sun once again showed its face, they could navigate and hoisted their sails. On the first sight of land, they sailed straight for it.

"Is this Greenland?" the crew asked Bjarni. He did not believe so, so they sailed on. The next land they found was green and pleasant with hills and woods. "Is this Greenland?" No, replied Bjarni again for there were no great and ice-bound mountains. The third land they discovered was covered with trees in a flat expanse. Once again Bjarni did not think it was Greenland and denied his crew the chance to land there to take on food and supplies. At this his shipmates grumbled but they sailed on anyway.

The next land was a mass of rock and ice, which raised the crew's hopes of an end of their voyages but proved to be only an island in the great sea. Through gales, Bjarni commanded his ship onwards. Finally they found a land that seemed to match the descriptions of Greenland that had come to them. The ship made for land. On the spit of land above their landing spot they discovered the home of Bjarni's father. Bjarni decided to give up voyaging and lived there with his father for the rest of the old man's days.

Leif sets forth

Word of Bjarni's haphazard voyages into the further west spread. Hearing of the lack of spirit Bjarni had shown in not exploring these new lands, people mocked him, but others took up the challenge of following his course through. Leif, son of Erik the Red, travelled to visit Bjarni to hear of his travels, and bought a ship from him.

Leif tried to persuade his father to join him on this new great exploration. At first Erik refused, feeling himself too old for the rigours of the long voyage. Salt spray and foaming ocean swells were thought more suitable for the young. Leif told him they could use his good luck on such a daring mission and succeeded in luring his father to the ship with praise of his skills. On the way, the horse Erik was riding stumbled and threw the old man. Erik took this for a divine sign that he had gone too far. No more lands were to be his for the taking and Erik returned to his home. Leif set sail for the lands beyond the west without him.

First the ship came to the island Bjarni had discovered that was nothing but a flat and rocky outcrop dominated by mountains of ice. No grass grew and all the necessities of life seemed absent. Leif called this Helluland, for it seemed to be nothing but flat rocks ('Hella' in Old Norse). They could not settle here and so Leif set out on his ship again.

The next land they found was flat and wooded, with broad and safe beaches of sand. Leif declared this land too would have a fitting name and called it Markland ('Forest Land'). They set out from this more promising land in hopes of greater discoveries.

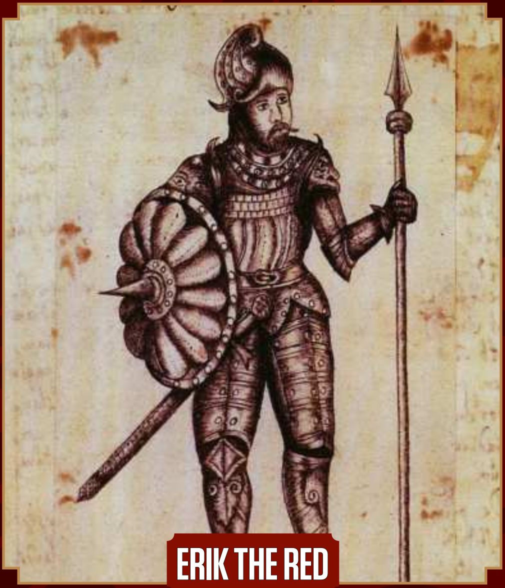
For two days and nights they travelled with a northwesterly wind in their sails. They landed on an island a short distance from a greater land. In the fine weather they explored the island. Seeing the dew on the lush grass, they tasted it and found it the sweetest water in all the world. Taking their ship to the land across the narrow gulf, the tide fell and the ship was grounded on a sandbank. Despite the dangers, they abandoned the ship in a small boat and crossed to the mainland. They discovered rich rivers and lakes in an abundant land. As the tide lifted the ship again, they rowed out and took the vessel up one of the rivers into a lake for safety.

The vines of Vinland

Once ashore, the crew decided to build a long house there. The nearby rivers teemed with the largest salmon any of them had seen and as winter drew in, the grass barely withered. There would be no need to supply cattle with fodder. Even in the depth of winter, the nights were nowhere near as long as

NEW WORLD EXPLORERS

The people who set out in search of the new western lands

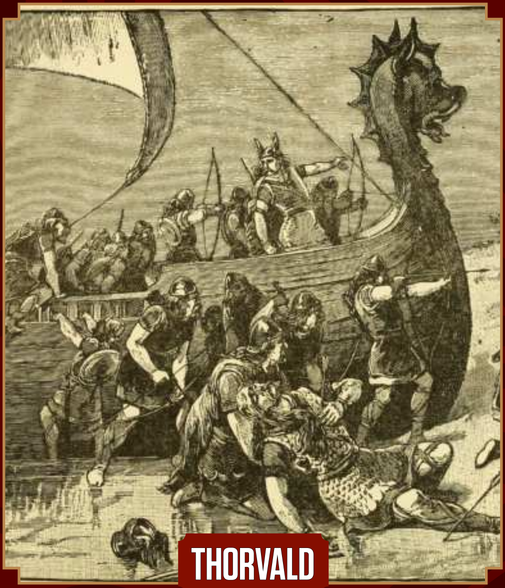


ERIK THE RED

Founder of the first Norse settlement in Greenland, Erik was exiled from both Norway and Iceland for his combative nature. He is also in *Eiríks saga rauða,* which deals with his settling of Greenland. Erik ended his life as paramount chieftain of Greenland, wealthy and respected. He was the father of several of the explorers who visited North America.

LEIF THE LUCKY

The son of Erik the Red, Leif was the first Norse captain to explore North America. He became a Christian at the court of the Norwegian king and preached the new religion in Greenland. His father did not convert, although his mother did build a church. Leif's explorations of what he named Vinland led other Norse explorers to follow him into the west.



THORVALD

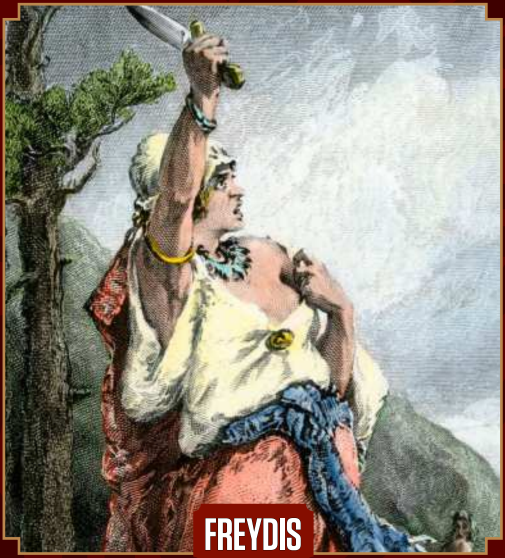
Brother of Leif, Thorvald led an expedition to Vinland that led to the first Norse encounter with the native peoples of North America. However, first contact led to violence and Thorvald was killed in a sea battle. Buried in Vinland, one of the aims of later voyages was to recover his body as Christians felt it was important that he be laid to rest in consecrated ground.

THORFINN KARLSEFNI

A founder of the first Norse settlement in North America, Thorfinn had been born into the elite of Icelandic society and he became a wealthy trader. He used his position and money to fund a voyage to Vinland, where his colony lasted for three years before Vinland was abandoned. Towards the end of his life, he retired to his estates on Iceland.

GUDRID

An early colonist in Greenland, Gudrid was one of the most travelled women of the Norse age. She accompanied her husband Karlsefni to the Vinland colony where she bore him a son - Snorri, the first European born in North America. After Karlsefni's death, Gudrid converted to Christianity and went on a pilgrimage to Rome. On her return to Iceland, she became a nun.



FREYDIS

Daughter of Erik the Red, the *Grœnlendinga saga* offers a very unflattering portrait of her. When attacked by Skraelings the men fled, but a pregnant Freydis exposed her breast and beat against it with her sword while yelling a war cry that drove the Skraelings back to their boats. The negative portrayal of her may be due to her unwillingness to convert to Christianity.

those in Greenland or Iceland. The longer days shone on a land that had no frost.

Leif split the company in half. One group would stay and guard the house while the other would explore the land they had discovered. On no account were the explorers to stay away overnight.

One night it was found that Tyrker the German had not returned with the foragers. This Tyrker was a loyal friend of Leif and Erik the Red, and Leif was angered that he should be lost in this strange land. With 12 men he set out to recover his friend. Only a short distance from the settlement they discovered Tyrker in a state of bewildered excitement. He babbled to the men in German and could not be understood. Rolling his eyes and grinning madly, Tyrker began to explain his discoveries in the Old Norse tongue. Having gone only a little further than the others, he stumbled on something new. "I have found vines and grapes," he told them. Tyrker swore that his homeland was famed for its grapes and that he knew what he was talking about. Despite grapes not being native to North America, there was presumably some delicious berry there that produced a sufficiently intoxicating drink when fermented.

It was from this discovery of vines that it is said that Leif named the new land Vinland. Leif now set his crew to cutting timber and collecting fruit. The cargo was loaded on the ship in the spring and they set out into the rising sun for home.

Leif the Lucky

With fair winds and a calm sea, the ship made its way swiftly back to Greenland. Within the sight of the ice mountains and valleys of their destination the crew called to their captain: "Why are you steering so much into the wind?" Leif had been turning the ship for some time. He asked if anyone could see anything out on the waves. None of the crew could, but then none of the crew could match Leif's hawk-like vision. "I see a ship or raft," Leif told them and pointed. Now they saw it too and the ship steered ever closer. "If they need help we will give it, and if they seek a fight we will be better prepared." On the ship they discovered a party in need of help.

When Thori, leader of those in the ship, heard Leif's name, he asked whether he was son of the famous Erik the Red. Leif said that he was and invited them onto his ships, with as many of their possessions as it could hold. For this rescue of those lost in the midst of the sea he became known as Leif the Lucky. Leif took Thori and his wife Gudrid into his own home.

That winter illness struck the settlers and Thori died, as did Erik the Red. While Leif had no plans to return to Vinland his brother, Thorvald, felt there was more exploring to do. He borrowed his brother's ship and set out.

Thorvald's voyage

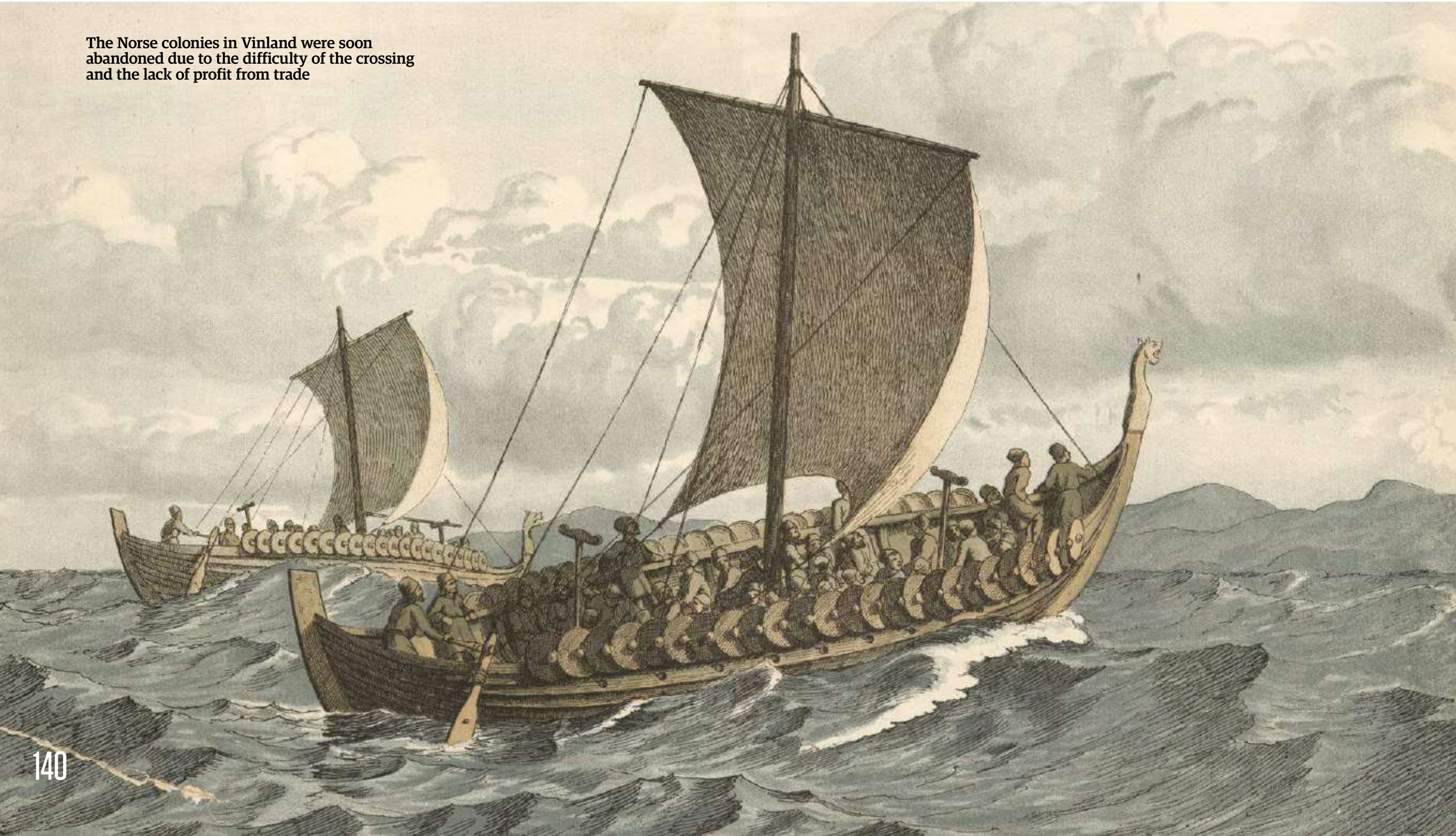
Following Leif's advice, Thorvald made for the place his brother had previously settled. Over winter, Thorvald and his 30 men took in provisions from the rich lands around them. When spring arrived, Thorvald loaded a smaller boat to explore the western coast during the summer.

The land they found was wooded and welcoming. The forests came down close to the sea and the beaches were of soft and pale sand. The islands and rivers offered many places to explore. Despite their searches, they found no animal lairs or signs of human habitation until they came to one of the western islands. There they found a wooden structure clearly set up to hold grain and keep it safe. Finding nothing else, Thorvald returned to the Norse settlement in the autumn.

The next summer they explored the eastern coast. As they crossed the sea, a high wind pushed them onto the rocks and damaged the keel of the ship. Putting ashore, they repaired the keel and Thorvald named the place Keelness. Sailing on after the mending, they came to a place of safe anchorage. The land there about was fair and fine. Thorvald looked at it and declared that this was where he would make his home.

Returning to the ship, the men stopped. There on the sand they saw three small mounds that had not been there before. Approaching, they could make out three canoes made of skin, each concealing three men underneath. These men they called Skraelings. The party divided into three to approach them. All but one of the hiding men were captured. The eight that they had seized they killed on the spot, but

> "The eight that they had seized they killed on the spot, but the ninth escaped"



The Norse colonies in Vinland were soon abandoned due to the difficulty of the crossing and the lack of profit from trade

The Vinland Map is allegedly a 15th century copy of a 13th century original, but its historicity is questioned

the ninth escaped into the woods. Returning to the headland, they looked about and in the distance discerned villages.

Then, as if placed under a powerful charm, the Norsemen were overcome by a sudden need to sleep. Only a voice booming out of the sky was able to call them back. "Awake, Thorvald, thou and all thy company, if thou wouldst save thy life; and board thy ship with all thy men, and sail with all speed from the land!" This the Norsemen did but even as they made it to their ship, innumerable canoes filled the sea. Thorvald called for the ship to put up its war-boards, shields to protect his men from arrows. Putting his faith in his ship's defences Thorvald offered no attack but let the arrows of the Skraelings clatter harmlessly against them. The Skraelings gave up the battle and retreated.

Thorvald called to his men to see if any had been wounded. None had taken so much as a scratch but the captain had not been so lucky himself. He showed his crew the shaft of an arrow, which had glanced through the war-boards and taken him under the arm. Knowing that his end would come soon, Thorvald ordered his men to flee as quickly as possible back to their own settlement. He only asked them to bury him at the point that he had thought would make a good home for his old age. "Bury me there," he told them, "and place a cross at my head, and another at my feet, and call it Crossness for the rest of time."

At the settlement, they gathered a cargo of wood and grapes before sailing back to Greenland, bringing with them the tale of Thorvald's discoveries and of his death.

The death of Thorstein

On Greenland, while Thorvald had been exploring, his brother Thorstein Eriksson had married Gudrid, one of those Leif the Lucky had rescued at sea. When Thorstein heard of his brother's death, he wanted to sail to Vinland and recover his body. He crewed Thorvald's own ship with 25 sturdy men and set out to the west. His wife Gudrid accompanied him.

For a whole summer it is said that their ship was buffeted by the sea and gales, so that they never knew where they were. By winter, they had reached the western settlement of Greenland and sheltered there. Homes were found for of all the crew except for Thorstein and Gudrid, who instead had to shelter on their ship. Shivering on the wooden deck, they were visited by a grim looking man. "I am called Thorstein the Swarthy," he announced to Gudrid and Thorstein Eriksson. The swarthy man offered them a house to live in and Thorstein Eriksson and Gudrid gladly accepted the offer.

"There on the sand they saw three small mounds that had not been there before"

But death came among the settlers in that season. Many of Thorstein Eriksson's band sickened and died. Thorstein had coffins made for the dead and carried them back to his ship so that the bodies could be returned to their family. Then the disease entered Thorstein the Swarthy's home, carrying off his wife. As Thorstein the Swarthy's wife Grimhild lay dead on her bed, she seemed to move. The house moaned as if all the timbers of the building shifted and groaned against each other. Thorstein Eriksson sickened after this strange sign. Gudrid did all she could to comfort her husband, yet he died. As she grieved over her husband's body, Thorvald the Swarthy sought to ease her suffering. He promised to accompany Gudrid home and carry with them all the bodies of the dead.

Then the dead man sat up and spoke loudly. "Where is Gudrid?" he asked three times. Gudrid did not know whether to answer the corpse so Thorvald the Swarthy asked, "What do you want?"

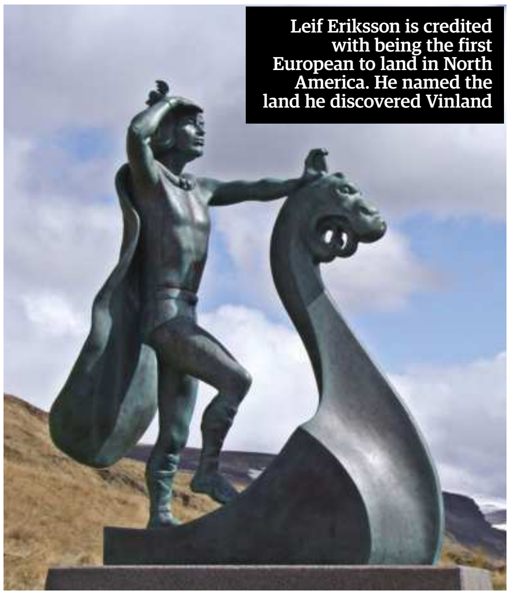
"I wish to tell Gudrid of the fate which is in store for her, so that my death may not sadden her too harshly, for I am at peace in a glorious place. I must tell you, Gudrid, that you will marry a man of Iceland, that many years of happy marriage shall be yours, and from you shall spring a large and famous progeny full of noble virtues. You shall travel the world - from Iceland to the far south before returning to take the veil in a church." Having prophesied the future with his dead tongue, Thorvald Eriksson returned to his bed.

Thorvald the Swarthy sold up his farm and possessions. He attended to Gudrid on her return to her home and returned the bodies of the dead to their families.

Karlsefni's travels

The same summer that had seen Gudrid return saw a ship arrive in Greenland from Norway, captained by Thorfinn Karlsefni. This wealthy captain was welcomed into Leif the Lucky's home and passed the winter there. Karlsefni soon found himself in love with the widow Gudrid and could not resist proposing marriage between them. At the time there was much talk of another voyage to Vinland. People clamoured for Karselfni to lead the expedition and he accepted. With 60 men and five women who were all promised an equal share of the profits of the journey, Karlsefni and Gudrid set out. Since it was their intention to found a permanent settlement in Vinland, they loaded many cattle onto their ships too. Leif loaned them the use of the long house he had constructed in Vinland for the duration of their trip, though he would not give it over to them forever.

The ships soon found the site of Leif's expedition. A huge whale was driven onto the sand where they



Leif Eriksson is credited with being the first European to land in North America. He named the land he discovered Vinland

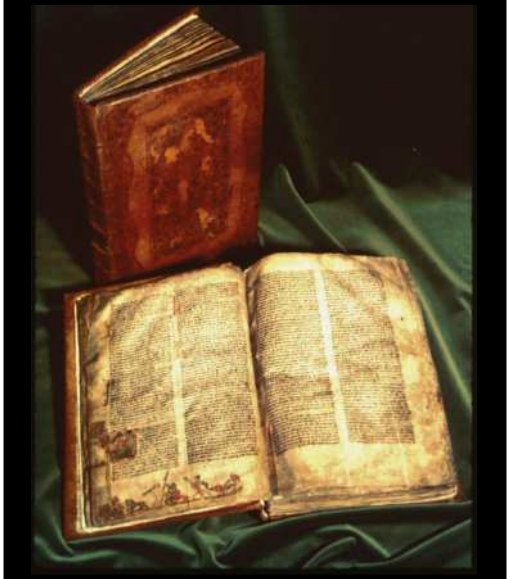
The only record of the voyage

There's just one source for this saga

The *Grœnlendinga saga* (or the *Saga of the Greenlanders*) comes down to us in a single manuscript written in the late 14th century called the *Flateyjarbók*. A fire, flood or the nibbling of rats might have deprived us of one of the only written sources that describes the Norse exploration of North America. Most experts place the composition of the saga in the 12th or 13th century, at least a century after the events described, but much of it has proved historically reliable, if liberally sprinkled with fabulous inventions.

The *Flateyjarbók* was written for Jón Hákonarson, a wealthy farmer in Iceland with an interest in literature. Thanks to an introduction, we know that it was written by two priests – Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson – which may explain the favourable depiction of Christianity in the text. Made from 225 fine vellum leaves, the writing in the *Flateyjarbók* contains many sagas of the kings of Norway and poems. Some of these are found elsewhere, but the *Grœnlendinga saga* is found nowhere else but the *Flateyjarbók*.

The manuscript remained on the island of Flatey for centuries. In 1651, King Frederick III of Denmark sent out a request for all old manuscripts in his kingdom to be added to the royal library. The *Flateyjarbók* left its home and would not be returned to Iceland until 1971, where it is now considered to be one of the national treasures of the country.



The Flateyjarbók is the only source for the *Grœnlendinga saga* and other valuable information regarding the Norse in North America

"When the Skraelings next came, they arrived in greater numbers"

captured it and stripped it of its flesh so that they would not go hungry that season. The cattle they set to wander freely over the land, though the bulls turned wild and vicious in their freedom. Soon the settlement was full of timber from the expansive forests, and their larders stocked with fish from the rivers and game hunted in the woods. Winter was not hard for the settlers. It looked like life in this new western land was promising.

The Skraelings came in the first summer. Many emerged from the forest but when they approached the settlers' cattle, the anger of the bull and its bellowing scared the Skraelings into retreat. Fleeing from the bull, the Skraelings stumbled towards Karlsefni's home and attempted to get inside. Karlsefni barred the doors. Since none could speak the language of the other, understanding was slow to be reached. The Skraelings then set out furs and other goods to trade. Karlsefni saw that the natives were eager to get some of the Norse weapons but he forbade any of his men to swap their sharp blades for goods. In place of weapons, he offered milk from the herd and a deal was struck.

Despite the peaceable outcome, Karlsefni had the settlement surrounded by a strong wooden palisade. In this safe place, Gudrid was delivered of a baby boy – the first European to be born in North America. They called him Snorri.

When the Skraelings next came, they arrived in greater numbers but still with packs of goods to trade. Karlsefni commanded the women to take out milk, which had been so sought after last time. When the Skraelings saw the milk they were so eager to trade that they hurled their goods over the wall and into the encampment. All seemed well.

But then one of the Skraelings attempted to seize a weapon from the Norsemen. He was slain on the spot. Immediately the Skraelings fled, abandoning all of their items to escape. Karlsefni called his band together and told them they must prepare for an attack by the Skraelings. When the natives did return, Karlsefni had his warriors drive their bull in front of them since it had so terrified their opponents before. The battle went poorly for the Skraelings – one of them did manage to wrest an iron axe from a Norseman, only to kill one of his own companions as he waved it about. The Skraeling chief, a huge man of fearsome power, picked up the axe and examined it. He flung it with all his might into the sea and his men retreated into the woods, never to meet the Norsemen there again.

The Norse passed the winter in peace but Karlsefni had made up his mind to return to Greenland. The ships were loaded with the timber of the land, the furs the Skraelings had traded to them, and the bounty of the vines.

The wrath of Freydis

By now, Vinland was thought of as a place where men might make their fortunes and win renown for their bravery and skills on the ocean. It chanced to happen that just as Karlsefni returned from Vinland, a ship carrying brothers from Norway arrived in Greenland. These brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi, were received by the daughter of Erik the Red, a haughty woman called Freydis. She asked the brothers to join her in a voyage to Vinland, with the spoils of the journey to be split equally between them. Helgi and Finnbogi agreed to this bargain and preparations

A reconstruction of a Norse long house at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, where archaeologists discovered evidence of Norse settlement in the New World

were made. Each promised to take an equal number of men, but Freydis immediately broke her word and carried an extra five men on her vessel. She tried to convince her brother Leif to give his home in Vinland to her, but once again he would only lend the house for as long as she was there.

It was only on arrival in Vinland that Helgi and Finnbogi discovered Freydis' treachery. It had been agreed that the ships would stay together but it happened that the brothers' ship landed first near the settlement. Finding Leif's empty house, they moved their goods into it. Freydis was outraged at their bold move and stormed at the brothers that they must remove themselves from the home lent to her by her brother. With ill grace, the two left and set up a house beside the sea.

The settlement set to the task of gathering goods that could be profitably returned to Greenland, with Freydis felling valuable wood for timber. As winter drew in, the brothers suggested that all of the settlement could come together in the playing of games. For a time there was peace between the factions but soon the games led to arguments, and arguments led to open hostility. The games were stopped. Now no one passed from Freydis' house to the brothers' and it was as if there were two camps drawn up for battle.

In the depth of that winter, Freydis crept from her bed and, cloaked in her husband's furs, crossed to the brothers' house. Barefoot, she passed over the dewy grass. Pushing open the door, she woke Finnbogi from his sleep. "What do you want?" he asked brusquely. Freydis queried whether he was happy in this new land. Finnbogi replied that the land was plentiful and that there was no cause for the breach between the two groups of settlers, and so Freydis offered a solution. She and her followers would leave Vinland if Finnbogi gave them his ship since it was the larger of the vessels that had carried them there. To be rid of her, Finnbogi agreed. On returning to her bed, Freydis' cold, wet feet woke her husband. "Where have you been?" he asked her.

She flared up. "I have been to see Helgi and Finnbogi! I wished to buy their ship but they received me so cruelly that they struck me and sent me from their door. Will you have your wife unavenged? I will leave you if you do not rid both me and yourself of this shame!"

At this, Freydis' husband rose from his bed and gathered his men around him. They took their weapons and broke into the brothers' house as everyone inside was still in their slumber. Every person inside was bound and led out. All of the men they killed at once but none of Freydis' followers could be induced to kill the five women that were there that fateful night. Freydis called for an axe and dispatched all five of the women herself. Now she swore her men to secrecy. Any man who spoke of the day's deeds would be killed by Freydis. They would claim the brothers' group had set sail, never to be seen again.

Back in Greenland, Freydis showered those who had sailed with her with the booty of their voyage, hoping to buy their silence. But it didn't work – news of her crimes soon spread. Leif came to hear of his sister's wrongdoings and even tortured some of her followers for their crimes, but, alas, he could not bring himself to punish his own sister. From that day onwards, however, Freydis and her husband were shunned by all who met them. Meanwhile, nothing but good was spoken of Thorfinn and Gudrid. Of their line sprung many noble and blessed progeny.

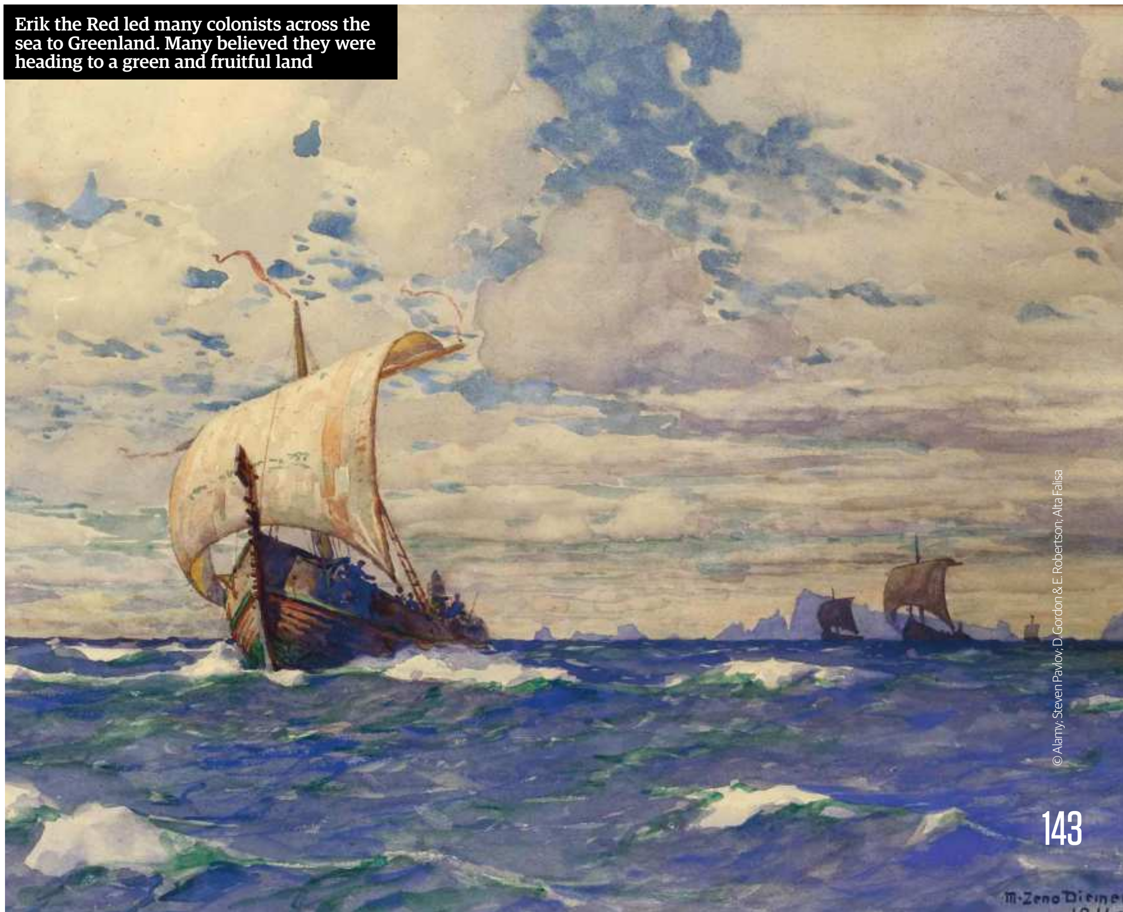
In search of Vinland

The earliest written account of the discovery of Vinland comes from around 1075 in the writings of Adam of Bremen, whose records told of the journeys into the west and the land that was found there.

"It is called Vinland because vines producing excellent wine grow wild there. That unsown crops also abound on that island we have ascertained not from fabulous reports but from the trustworthy relation of the Danes." However, the failure of the Norse to establish lasting colonies on the North American continent led to their discoveries being mostly forgotten about in Europe.

While Norse settlements have been discovered in North America by archaeologists, such as at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, the exact locations described in the saga are still under debate. At one point in the saga we are told that on the shortest day of the year, the Sun was visible between 'dagmálastaður' and 'eyktarstaður'. If we knew what exact times of day were meant by these terms, we would be able to identify the latitude of the Norse North American settlements. We might also be able to identify the unfortunate natives that were dubbed 'Skraelings'. It says much about Norse culture that the first meeting with the Skraelings was a massacre for which no cause is given. Inuit folk tales tell of killing a foreigner, using the term used for European, and knowing that they would return to seek revenge.

The mystery of the vines of Vinland also persists. Tyrker might have been sure they were grapes, but we still do not know what berries the Norse actually discovered in North America – they possibly could have been cranberries or bunchberries. Whatever they were, the wine that was produced from them was certainly potent enough to tempt others to follow in search of them.



Erik the Red led many colonists across the sea to Greenland. Many believed they were heading to a green and fruitful land

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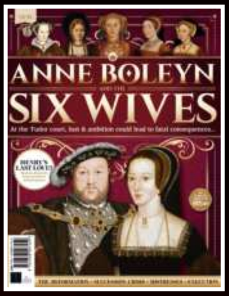

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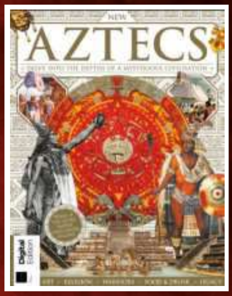

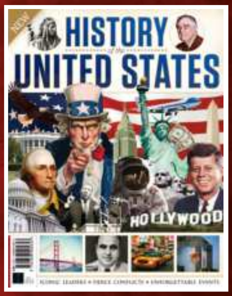

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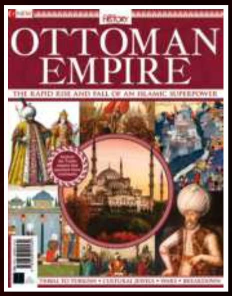

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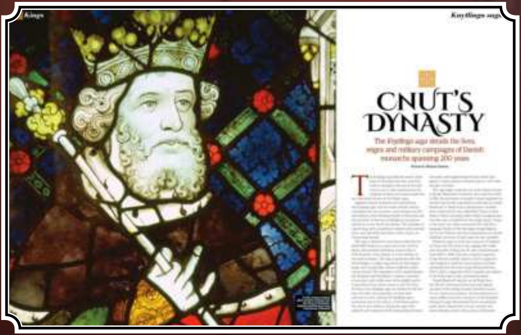

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